No.2

THE EASTER OFFENSIVE VIETNAM 1972

Volume 1: Invasion across the DMZ

ALBERT GRANDOLINI

Asia@War SERIES

Also by Albert Grandolini in the Asia@War series:
The Easter Offensive – Vietnam 1972. Volume 2: Tanks in the Streets

Published in 2015 by:
Helion & Company Limited
26 Willow Road
Solihull
West Midlands
B91 1UE
England
Tel. 0121 705 3393
Fax 0121 711 4075
email: info@helion.co.uk
website: www.helion.co.uk
Twitter: @helionbooks
Visit our blog http://blog.helion.co.uk/

Text © Albert Grandolini 2015
Photographs © as individually credited
Color profiles © Tom Cooper 2015
Maps © Helion & Company Limited. Drawn by George Anderson

Designed & typeset by Farr out Publications, Wokingham, Berkshire
Cover design by Farr out Publications, Wokingham, Berkshire
Printed by Lightning Source Ltd, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

ISBN 978-1-914377-24-2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, manipulated in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any mechanical, electronic form or by any other means, without the prior written authority of the publishers, except for short extracts in media reviews. Any person who engages in any unauthorized activity in relation to this publication shall be liable to criminal prosecution and claims for civil and criminal damages.

Cover: The offensive across the DMZ was spearheaded by two armored regiments. These Type 63s from the 66th Battalion of the 202nd Armored Regiment 'swim' across the Ben Hai River on the eastern part of the DMZ. (PAVN); T-54B number 391 of the PAVN 203rd Armored Regiment, northwest of Dong Ha, April 1972 (color profile).

CONTENTS

Abbreviations 2

1 The origin of the campaign 2

2 The allied forces 4

3 The communist forces 10

4 Prelude to the storm 17

5 Invasion across the DMZ 21

6 Stalemate at Hue 35

7 The ARVN on the offensive 38

Bibliography 46

Acknowledgments 48

Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events.

Abbreviations

AA	Anti-aircraft
AAA	Anti-Aircraft Artillery
ACS	Armored Cavalry Squadron
AFB	Air Force Base (used for US Air Force bases)
APC	Armored Personnel Carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the South Vietnamese Army
ATGM	Anti-tank guided missile
Brig Gen	Brigadier General (military commissioned officer rank)
Capt	Captain (military commissioned officer rank)
CBU	Cluster bomb unit
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
C-in-C	Chief-in-Command
CO	Commanding Officer
Col	Colonel (military commissioned officer rank)
Col Gen	Colonel General (top military commissioned officer rank)
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
DCAT	Division Combat Assistance Team
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone, separating North from South Vietnams
FAC	Forward Air Controller, usually airborne controller in observation aircraft
FSB	Fire Support Base
Gen	General (military commissioned officer rank)
GP	General-purpose (bomb)
HQ	Headquarters
KIA	Killed in action
Km	Kilometer
Lt	Lieutenant (military commissioned officer rank)
Lt Col	Lieutenant Colonel (military commissioned officer rank)
1st Lt	First Lieutenant (military commissioned officer rank)
2nd Lt	Second Lieutenant (lowest military commissioned officer rank)
Maj	Major (military commissioned officer rank)
MANPADS	Man-portable air defense system(s). A light surface-to-air missile system that can be carried and deployed in combat by a single soldier
MBT	Main Battle Tank
MIA	Missing in action
MR	Military Region
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam, the North Vietnamese Army
PoW	Prisoner of War
RAC	Regional Assistance Command
RF/PF	Regional Forces/People's Forces from the ARVN
SA-2 Guideline	ASCC codename for S-75 Dvina, Soviet SAM system
SA-7 Grail	ASCC codename for 9K32 Strela-2, Soviet MANPADS
SAM	Surface-to-air Missile
UHF	Ultra High Frequency
USMC	United States Marine Corps
USAF	United States Air Force
USN	United States Navy
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force, Air Force of South Vietnam
VNMC	Vietnamese Marine Corps
WIA	Wounded in Action

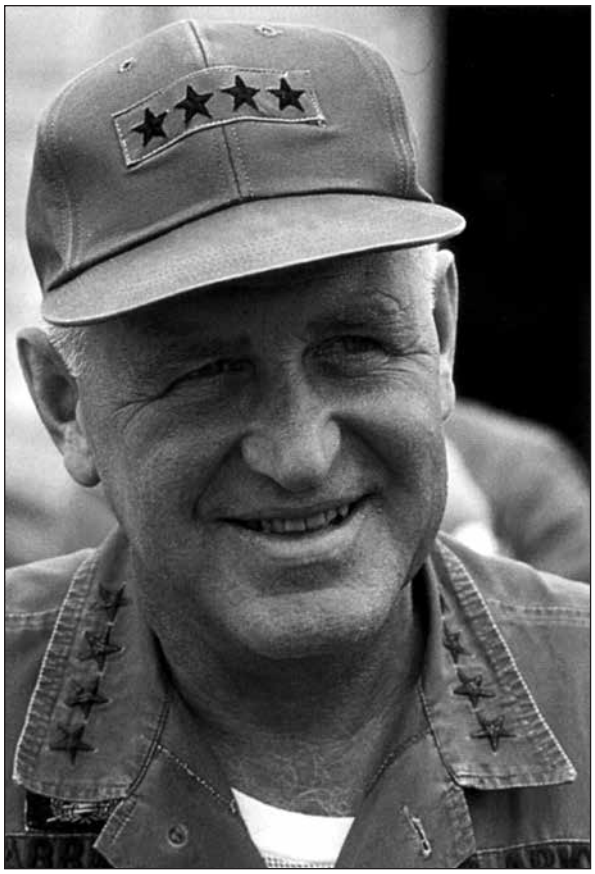
CHAPTER 1
THE ORIGIN OF THE CAMPAIGN

The aftermath of the communist Tet Offensive in 1968 brought with it a change of resolve in Washington for a long-drawn war in Vietnam. Even if the local Viet Cong forces and its administrative infrastructure had been badly defeated, the US was mired in a strategic stalemate with North Vietnam as they had shown no sign of abandoning the objective of imposing communist rule in the South.

An increasing percentage of American public opinion now openly questioned the reason for fighting there – and in view of this in 1969 the United States initiated its 'Vietnamization' policy in South East Asia. The ever-increasing public sentiment further led the new Richard Nixon administration to call for a 'highly forceful approach' to the policy so that South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu assumed greater responsibility for the war-effort. The devised scheme called for a massive upgrade of South Vietnamese military capacity whilst gradually reducing the number of US troops deployed in the field. Four years into this policy, significant results were witnessed in South Vietnam, with 47,000 guerrillas that had ralllied the government in 1969, and 32,000 in 1970, a trend that continued the following year. Even if one is cautious using Vietnam War statistics due to different collation methods, by early 1972 guerrilla activity in the countryside was at its lowest ebb for decades. The Viet Cong had also not been able to recover from the losses suffered during the Tet Offensive and the heavy fighting of 1969–1970. Its underground administrative network had also been badly weakened by Operation Phoenix coordinated by the CIA, where between 26,000–41,000 suspected enemy civilians were ruthlessly executed. The rural economy was now also recovering thanks to massive US economic aid and an agrarian reform program initiated by Saigon. US advisors attached to the pacification campaign repeatedly indicated that the situation was steadily improving, with most of the South Vietnamese peasants rejecting the Viet Cong and people showing no real enthusiasm for the corrupt regime.

Tactically the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) brought in over one million men, including half of them from peasant militias to support most of the combat operations. The newly reinforced units were at the vanguard of the cross-border operations into Cambodia in 1970 and in Laos in 1971, in order to destroy and disrupt the enemy

General Vo Nguyen Giap was the Commander-in-Chief of the North Vietnamese armed forces in 1972. He was also the founder of the People's Army of Vietnam and turned it from a guerrilla into a conventional force. (PAVN)



Lieutenant General Abrams succeeded General Westmoreland as head of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in 1969. (US Army)

logistical system. These operations revealed the strong and weak points of the ARVN (for example, when it operated a common US-South Vietnamese offensive benefiting from American expertise, like in Cambodia). They performed well – running aggressive sweeps. In Laos they had no American advisors due to political rumblings and thus engaged in insufficient numbers which meant the ARVN were less effective.

A plan to attack the Ho Chi Minh Trail had long been on the Pentagon agenda and six US divisions were supposedly available. However, when the Nixon administration finally gave the green light it was the ARVN – alone with less than half the planned force and far less firepower – that undertook with the brutal task. Furthermore, for the first time the South Vietnamese faced an enemy fighting a conventional battle organized on a Corps level, with tanks, artillery and a strong anti-aircraft gunning umbrella. Consequently, helicopter assaults suffered the worst losses experienced during the entire conflict with 168 destroyed and over 618 damaged. The withdrawing mechanized columns suffered extensively in very difficult terrains along jungle trails.

Anti-war sentiment in the US continued to grow notably after the cross-border raids into Cambodia in 1970 forcing Nixon to accelerate the withdrawal of US troops. Furthermore, the US administration now wanted to withdraw as quickly as possible from a conflict riddled with morale and discipline problems along with racial rioting, fearing this would spread to the whole of the armed forces. The anti-war sentiment also led to great difficulties in recruiting enough officers and specialists to fill all the required posts of a US Army that had grown to 1,512,000 men and women in 1969, with an additional 310,000 USMC personnel. Recruitment problems also hit the elite institutions like the Air Force pilots' community, where many of them preferred to quit for better paid jobs with airline companies rather than continue to stay with the military. Budgetary constraints due to an increasing economic downturn would also soon force the Pentagon to reduce the size of its armed forces, which in early 1971 had already been slashed by 400,000 men. The troops deployed in South Vietnam were now required for garrison duties in Western Europe, Japan, South Korea and elsewhere, which meant that around 177,000 American soldiers left Vietnam in 1971.

By January 1972 there were only 158,000 US troops left in the country and during that month President Nixon announced that he would withdraw a further 70,000 troops by 1 May. Between February and April 58,000 troops returned to the United States, making it the single largest troop withdrawal of the war, meaning that by the end of March there were only 69,000 US troops left in the country – most in logistical roles supporting two depleted brigades. What remained were army aviation elements as well as a reduced USAF presence providing air support to the South Vietnamese.

The negotiations that started in Paris in May 1968 between the United States and the communist side also bogged down, not due in small measure to the intransigence of the South Vietnamese delegation. However, Washington – in a master-stroke of diplomacy – opened direct negotiations with China, widening the existing gap between Peking and Moscow. This resulted in the now historic trip of President Nixon to Peking in February 1972. The Americans had also approached the Soviets within the cadre of a new détente policy in the Cold War, with the purpose of reducing the number of strategic weapons. Washington hoped that the main supporters of North Vietnam would talk Hanoi into some sort of compromise but this was not the case. North Vietnamese leaders proved to be independent of their bigger communist cousins and skilfully followed their own agenda by playing Moscow against Peking. In doing this

they feared that their strained relationship with China would come to an end, so when Hanoi learned that Nixon would come to Peking, the North Vietnamese tried in vain to cancel the summit. However, in order to raise the stakes in the coming negotiations with Washington, the Chinese did not rule out backing the North Vietnamese military against the South. The North Vietnamese Politburo immediately understood the need to act quickly as Chinese support could dwindle.

Since June 1971 General Secretary Le Duan had sought detailed plans for a new offensive in case the negotiations did actually break down. His request initially met resistance because many believed that the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) was not yet ready to engage in such ambitious operations. There were still American residual forces, and more importantly, could the North withstand another air campaign similar to that carried out by the Johnson administration until the end of 1968? Ironically, it was the Chinese–American discussions that led to an ease in tensions in South East Asia, prompting Hanoi to take on the offensive anyway. A new military aid agreement was signed between China and North Vietnam in July 1971 that saw additional deliveries of heavy equipment, including tanks and trucks. Moscow, not wanting to be outdone by the Chinese, decided to send additional tanks, artillery, combat aircraft and considerable surface-to-air missiles in order to upgrade the North Vietnamese air defense system.

Benefiting from the PAVN forming a more mechanized and armored force, Hanoi decided to put Nixon's Vietnamization policy to its ultimate test by launching a full-scale, nationwide offensive against South Vietnam. The purpose of the campaign, now that nearly all US forces had departed, was to destroy a great part of a perceived fragile ARVN, occupy as much territory as possible and offset gains made by the South Vietnamese in the pacification program. Any opportunity would be exploited to break the South Vietnamese resistance completely and presented to the world as a victory over them and the remaining US troops. Hanoi more realistically hoped to actually grab strategic advantage with this offensive and return to the negotiation table in a strong position. Thus began the fiercest campaign of the Vietnam War in terms of military engagement and length of fighting. The nature of the war had changed dramatically, evolving from a guerrilla one into a conventional conflict that set the trend until the fall of Saigon three years later. The North Vietnamese would learn the hard way how to conduct mechanized operations against a better organized southern force.

The ARVN would always fight proudly and often heroically with the help of US airpower and a small number of American advisors, but due to the fact that almost all US ground troops had departed by now, these years of the war are often overlooked. This book remedies that by not only looking at American archives but also Vietnamese sources. The role played by US airpower against North Vietnam (Operation Linebacker and Linebacker II) is outside the scope of focus here which only deals with ground operations taking place in South Vietnam. These air offensives are noted by a brief summary so the reader can gain a strategic picture of the campaign. Geographically the war was mostly fought on three distinct areas: the northern part of South Vietnam, where the North Vietnamese attacked across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and from Laos; the Central Highlands; and the area north of Saigon, with strong guerrilla activity in the Mekong Delta Area. For clarity, each battle area is treated separately even if many battles are taking place simultaneously.

CHAPTER 2
THE ALLIED FORCES

The South Vietnamese forces

The South Vietnamese armed forces was set up during the French Indochina War and underwent great reorganization after the Geneva Accords, which saw the splitting of Vietnam into two distinct states. The military was restructured by grouping the units deployed in the northern part of the country and by integrating some French colonial troops of Vietnamese origin. After facing a series of internal rebellions against groups of non-communist dissidents, who rejected the rule of the new Ngo Dinh Diem regime – such as the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects, and the Binh Xuyen – the ARVN was streamlined. With aid from the American Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) the ARVN became a more conventional force to withstand an invasion from North Vietnam. However, the ARVN was underprepared to cope with the communist guerrilla threat and the situation worsened due to political instability following the coup that overthrew President Diem in November 1963. This was followed by several other coups which drew America's hand and finally forced them to intervene in the conflict in 1965. With this, the nature of the war changed radically, with the Americans taking over the majority of main operations, casting aside the ARVN and its politicized inner-core. The Americans had never fully integrated the ARVN into a combined allied supreme headquarters like they had during the Korean War. Instead, they set up the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) which would work in parallel with the ARVN Join General Staff (JGS).

Constitutionally, the supreme commander of the South Vietnamese armed forces was the President of the Republic. He was advised by the Defense Minister, the National Security Council, and the Central Pacification and Development Council on military and strategic issues. The JGS was in theory the body charged with implementing war strategy and conducting military operations, through combining the efforts of the ARVN, the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) as well as the VN Navy. In reality, due to the nature of South Vietnamese politics, it was President Nguyen Van Thieu who alone had the final say. Being the strongman of South Vietnam for nearly seven years, Thieu had succeeded in restoring stability to a very volatile political scene. Nevertheless, he remained cautious on military and strategic issues – he rarely shared his views with his subordinates fearing they would expose him to his political rivals. Every military action had domestic implications and all decisions were taken by the President within a small circle of appointees and loyal followers.

Most of his inner-circle were generals who had supported him during various coups that had rocked the country in the early 1960s, and collectively were part of what was called the 'Delta Clan' from the days of serving with him in the Mekong Delta Area. Even down to the provincial chief level, every post held by ARVN officers was decided by Thieu with the aforethought of averting coups. He dealt directly with the four military regional Corps commanders who also exercised authority over the province chiefs. Each Corps commander then had wide-reaching powers within his military region and acted autonomously as local operational commander – they answered

The M41A3 formed the backbone of the ARVN armored units but was now clearly outmatched by the North Vietnamese T-54. (US Army)

The South Vietnamese Signal Corps stand proud during the Armed Forces Day parade, on 19 June 1971. Pictured is new communication equipment and radio antennae mounted on a Japanese Toyota DW 15L in the foreground with US M35 trucks in the background. (ARVN)

only to the President. However, these power-hungry 'pillars of the regime' would often not coordinate their operations with the other attached units when they were deployed in the field, which made strategic operations very difficult. Further complicating things was Thieu's tendency to take tactical decisions that overruled the local commanders, without always informing them.

The reality was then that little coordination existed at national level and the JGS, placed under the command of Lieutenant General Cao Van Vien, had only an advisory role and were tasked with budgetary and manpower tasks. Lieutenant General Vien rarely, if ever, interfered with Corps Commanders' operational plans and decisions except for cross-border operations or when the General Reserve units were involved. The ARVN High Command was plagued by incompetent and politically appointed leaders which drew from a small pool of those that had been cast aside and confined to mere pacification operations. ARVN commanders had few opportunities to hone their military skills and whilst the VNAF and the VNN had developed into modern entities, the ARVN commanders had no grasp of how to exploit them. All of these factors combined to limit the ARVN command structure, but ironically one of the biggest problems they faced was the actual Vietnamization program itself. At the beginning of the conflict, the US forces quickly placed the ARVN into support roles dealing with pacification tasks only, which meant they were often outgunned by the enemy and relegated to what were then viewed as secondary roles. Therefore, South Vietnam's armed forces missed out on several years' worth of development and combat experience that would have greatly increased their capabilities – even if they did perform relatively well during the infamous Tet Offensive of 1968.

Unfortunately then – even if they were not fully prepared and well-structured – it was still the South Vietnamese who were called to bear most of the fighting at a rate that they had difficulty to cope with. Initially it was envisaged that their 'burden' would run from 1968 to 1974 with a strong US ground force supporting the ARVN, but as things accelerated they were forced to undertake harder tasks. Initially they were only called upon to root the Viet Cong but this grew to coping with North Vietnamese regulars and then offensives into Cambodia and Laos – and now to totally replace the Americans. However, the lack of competent officers stagnated the whole process and the envisaged speed of battle-adaption stalled several times over. The problem lay in the fact that the ARVN was competing with other services in recruiting the best candidates, notably with the Navy and particularly the Air Force. Consequently, by 1969 nearly half of the infantry battalions were commanded by officers two ranks lower than the required level. In order to solve this recruitment problem it was decided to increase the intake of candidates at the Reserve Officer School of Thu Duc – which promoted some 11,000 officers between 1968–1969. The school offered an accelerated syllabus of only one year in comparison with the four years required at the National Military Academy of Dalat.

However, even when around 1,000 discharged officers were also called back to fill the void, it only partially negated the combat losses, and those officers discharged for corruption. A promotion policy also saw around 2,653 middle rank officers enlisted, but statistics still showed that 40 percent of these were not posted to operational units but served in various civilian administrative structures at provincial and district levels. In fact, it wasn't until the end of 1970 that a structured program was launched. With this, 12,000 ARVN officers were sent to the United States for advanced training at a number of military schools – including the US Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

By the end of 1971 the situation had slightly improved, but a third of infantry battalions were still commanded by captains, whilst most of the ARVN officers had held their command for less than a year. By early 1972 the overextended ARVN disbanded 15 infantry battalions in order to 'spread' the number of available officers, and under American pressure it was also decided to set up a Command and Staff School as well as a Political Warfare School in 1969 – in order to improve the professional hierarchy level of the ARVN. The National Defense Academy offered comprehensive one-year training in academic matters relating to strategy -and five classes graduated from it between 1968–1973 – but again, less than 10 of the 111 colonels and generals that successfully passed-out were later placed in key command posts. In fact, in the much politicized command structure, it was still President Thieu who nominated every officer irrespective of their credentials.

Even so, the South Vietnamese armed forces did see considerable expansion during the Vietnamization process because the more the Americans withdrew their troops, the quicker the growth had to be. Between 1969 and 1972 the South Vietnamese increased the size of its military forces from 825,000 to over one million. After years of prodding from their American allies to fully mobilize the country of 19 million for an all-out war, the Saigon Government was finally doing so. The end result was that the ARVN combat strength had increased to 120 infantry battalions in 11 divisions, supported by 58 artillery battalions, 19 armored cavalry regiments (battalion-sized if compared

Each ARVN Armored Cavalry Squadron had three APC troops, and one tank troop, totaling 17 M41s and 66 M113s. These vehicles belonged to the 5th ACS.

A US Army instructor oversees the training at Duc My Artillery School on a M114 155mm howitzer. (US Army)

to a US unit), and many engineer and signal formations. The Strategic Reserve was composed of the Airborne Division and the Marine Division, both with three brigades each, whilst the Paratroopers and the Marines could be deployed at short notice throughout the country. However, both units had never really operated at their divisional strength, instead committed to brigades or temporary task forces. By 1972 the regular ARVN divisions were robust organizations with modern equipment and weaponry, and included three infantry regiments with three battalions each. They also included one artillery regiment; a cavalry squadron; an engineer battalion; and various logistic units. The 1st Division and 22nd Division were considered 'heavy' divisions with four regiments.

In addition to the ARVN divisions, there were also 21 Ranger Battalions and 37 Border Ranger Battalions. The Rangers acted like light infantry and shock-troops and were also reinforced with artillery – they served as reserves to be used in times of need and operated within the boundary of each Military Region, but could be shifted occasionally to other threatened areas. The Border Rangers were the former Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) run conjointly by the US and South Vietnamese Special Forces to man outposts along the Cambodian and Laotian borders, and to launch cross-border runs for intelligence. These units were recruited mainly from ethnic minorities like the Cambodian Khmer Krom or the Montagnard Hill tribes. Their integration, which started at the end of 1969, posed some serious problems due to the animosity between the Vietnamese and some of the minorities who had set up an armed movement in a loose organization known as the FULRO – the French acronym for *Front de Libération des Races Opprimés* – Oppressed Races Liberation Front. The Saigon Government never fully gained the loyalty of these tribes, but by and large they rejected the North Vietnamese rule too.

After years of neglect, Washington now gave top priority to equipping the ARVN and over one million M16 rifles had been delivered since 1969, as well as 12,000 M60 machine guns; 40,000 M79 grenade launchers; 790 4.2inch (107mm) mortars; 10,000 radios; and 20,000 trucks. Tactically, the divisions were grouped within four Corps and each Corp was in turn assigned to a particular Military Region (MR). The 1st Corps then operated in MR I – which covered the northern part of the country, from the North Vietnamese border to south of Da Nang. The 2nd Corps was assigned to the MR II – covering the Central Highlands and the coastal area between Qui Nhon to Phang Rang. The 3rd Corps operated within the MR III – covering the area around Saigon. Finally, the 4th Corps served in MR IV – containing most of the Mekong Delta Area.

The regular forces comprised of less than half the strength of the South Vietnamese forces (535,000 men) and complementing them was the Territorial Forces, which played a key role in the pacification program. They included 282,000 Regional Forces (RF), organized into battalions and assigned to military provincial control, and 243,000 Popular Forces (PF) organized into platoons and assigned at district level. These RF/PF soldiers were now re-equipped with modern M16 rifles and M79 grenade launchers, but their main task was only to deal with local Viet Cong because when facing regular PAVN units, they were usually not up to the challenge. Finally, there were more than 500,000 within the People's Self-Defense Forces (PSDF). These militias were only part-time guards operating at village and hamlet levels, and armed with Second World War vintage M1 rifles and carbines.

The main purpose of the Vietnamization process was to increase the mobility and firepower of these South Vietnamese divisions and to combine their artillery assets. Thus, by the end of 1969 the Marines and Paratroopers had two artillery battalions, while half of the infantry divisions had three battalions. It was only the elite Marine and Airborne Divisions which were different and comprised of a single organic artillery battalion, while a US Army division normally had five artillery battalions. By 1972 however, the continuing military push resulted in the creation of three medium artillery battalions – with 105mm howitzers and one heavy 155mm howitzers battalion – for each infantry division. The Airborne and Marine Divisions now also deployed three 105mm battalions, but these expansion programs pushed the artillery school of Duc My to the verge of breaking point.

Due to the complexity of the system a new simplified training program was set up in 1970 which drafted in 2,327 specialists. Mobile US Army training teams also visited the ARVN units in order to provide additional training, while selected South Vietnamese artillerymen were posted to American units for 'on the job training' to gain additional experience. The independent artillery battalions attached to the Corps also underwent tremendous expansion, with 12 new battalions of 105mm and seven of 155mm being added. However, the whole program was slow-paced due to the delay of delivering the required 155mm howitzers, with only 294 out of 701 procured by early 1970. It also took longer to set up the two M107 175mm self-propelled artillery battalions which entered service in 1971. Artillery units were also allowed to support the Regional Forces, with 176 platoons of two 105mm howitzers each transported throughout the countryside to numerous outposts. By the end of 1971, the ARVN deployed some

1,202 artillery tubes.

The other main focus of attention was the ARVN armored branch which had not really been updated since its first incarnation under the French between 1950–1952 – with three companies of M8 reconnaissance armored cars, M3 scout cars, and M3 half-tracks. With the arrival of US advisors in 1956 the existing units were reorganized into Armored Cavalry Regiments (ACR), each comprising of two reconnaissance squadrons equipped with M8 armored cars; M3 half-tracks M3 scout cars; and one tank squadron on M24 Chaffees. The French ARVN unit designations were retained and equated to fighting power rather than personnel strength, the method used by the US Army. This meant that an ARVN armored regiment was equivalent in size to an American battalion or squadron.

In 1961 the ARVN introduced the new M113 APC, which was modified into a fighting vehicle, where the mounted troops often shot out from inside the vehicle rather than having to dismount, a tactic later adopted by the US Army. The new vehicle would become the cornerstone of the ARVN armored units and were organized into Mechanized Rifles Squadrons, along with the ACR – now deploying a squadron of 17 M41A3 Walker Bulldog tanks, and three squadrons of 15 M113s. In the summer of 1967, it was decided to increase the number of M113s per squadron from 15 to 22, while the M125A1 81mm mortar and M106 4.2 inch mortar carriers were also introduced along with M132 flamethrowers. Regimental headquarters retained their armored car platoons, each with 17 V100s, while the number of Armored Cavalry Squadrons became 10. At the end of the same year, in accordance with US practice, the designation 'armored regiments' changed to 'squadron' and 'squadron' into 'troops'. However, the old designation system continued to be used in tandem with the new.

With this, the Vietnamization policy saw the addition of eight cavalry regiments and the formation of what eventually became four armored brigades. The 4th Armored Brigade was created in 1969 in Can Tho and attached to Military Region IV, in the Mekong Delta Area, followed by the 1st Armored Brigade, in Da Nang in the Military Region I. 1970 saw the creation of the 3rd Armored Brigade at Bien Hoa, in Military Region III. Finally, the 2nd Armored Brigade was created in 1971 at Pleiku in Military Region II.

At the end of 1971 at Pleiku in the Central Highlands, a new armored cavalry regiment – the 19th ACR – was created with the intended delivery of M48A3 Patton tanks in order to counter the North Vietnamese T34-85s, T-54s and Type 59s. However, the project was somewhat delayed due to the lack of vehicles and a longer than anticipated training program. Finally, some M42 Dusters along with truck-mounted quad 50 caliber machine guns were delivered to form an artillery Air Defense Battalion. By early 1972, the cavalry units included over 1,200 M113 APCs, as well as 400 M41 light tanks, and 56 M48 medium tanks – all within with the newly launched 20th Tank Squadron. However, the unit still lacked bridging equipment as well as M88 recovery vehicles.

The armored units did not operate independently and they took direct orders from the Armored Brigade, which were normally used as a general reserve at each Corps level within each Military Region. The Armor Command attached to the JGS only had administrative and logistical powers over single M113 squadrons (or troops) assigned to each infantry division. However, the armored units themselves often operated within provisional combined task forces with attached infantry and artillery, ranging from company to regimental sizes which allowed more flexibility at local tactical level. They did, however, often lack 'staying-power' when confronted by enemy tank formations because many ARVN commanders were not used to facing such a threat. US advisors also noted that only two-thirds of the ARVN infantry divisions assessed were at an acceptable standard. The remaining units were considered mediocre with many leadership, training and experience problems because officers were mostly assigned to mere local communist threats. Operations at Corps level remained limited and often revealed many deficiencies in coordination and, apart from the Airborne and Marine Divisions, the ARVN lacked deployment mobility too. In fact, there were many problems and the visiting US advisors rarely grasped the military and social pressures being weighed down upon the ARVN. Being a soldier was often not through choice or a moral undertaking but actually the only way to support families. Thus, morale was often low and soldiers were permanently exposed to a very effective propaganda effort, highlighting widespread corruption within the ARVN itself. The South Vietnamese did try to counter the propaganda via the agrarian reform 'land to the tillers' program, which aimed to quash growing unrest.

Until the end of 1968, ARVN soldiers armed with Second World War vintage M1 Garand rifles were outgunned by the North Vietnamese and even the Viet Cong AK-47s. The Americans then launched a rush modernization program by delivering over one million modern M16 rifles. (US Army)

The divisions were also spread very thinly to fill voids left by retreating US units, so the pressure placed on soldiers was often unbearable, but the biggest problem facing the military was the South Vietnamese political system itself. Commanders frequently held back deploying troops in case a political rival would benefit, and thus for many ARVN soldiers this never-ending war had raged for decades and the only way out was being wounded or killed. In turn, this meant the desertion rate remained at around 130,000 troops per year – with most desertions during the harvest season when soldiers returned home to help families, whilst others just quit their units outright for volunteer enlistment with the Regional Forces or the police. When President Thieu ordered full mobilization and enforced conscription for all men between 18–38, with those aged between 17–43 also being possible recruits, the South Vietnamese were on their knees.

The problem of recruitment was also aggravated by the fact various branches of the armed forces all competed to fill their ranks. For example: the ARVN in 1969 was requested to transfer some 23,000 soldiers to the National Police – the military reluctantly transferred just 1,000 men. This hostility and detrimental recruitment drive meant that although the South Vietnamese ground forces were the primary focus of this modernization effort, the other services were also expanded and modernized during this period. By 1972, the Vietnamese Navy (VNN) mostly deployed in MR IV had 43,000 men

By 1972 even the Territorial Forces began to be re-equipped with modern infantry weapons including M16 rifles, M79 grenade launchers and M72 LAW. A team of American advisors trained these troops from a Regional Force battalion in the use of an M60 machine gun. (US Army)

and operated 1,680 ships and boats, and the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) more than doubled its size by this time too – increasing to nine tactical wings; 42,000 personnel; and nearly 1,000 aircraft, including A-1 and A-37 ground attack aircraft; and F-5A fighters. The most spectacular expansion though was the helicopter force which grew from a few squadrons to a fleet of over 500 machines. Thousands of airmen just-graduated from air schools, were then posted to US Army helicopter units for short 'on the job' training before being sent to raise new VNAF squadrons. These inexperienced units were often plagued by problems, notably with operating in bad weather or at night. The VNAF fighter pilots proved to be a competent force but lacked high-performance machines able to operate in a high-risk environment.

The US forces

Ironically, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) which was set up as an advisory body to the ARVN became increasingly less influential with the arrival of US ground units in 1965 – but with the Vietnamization program, the advisor's task once again became paramount. It was in fact the main priority of new MACV Commander, General Creighton Abrams, who replaced General Westmoreland following the Tet Offensive in June 1968. General Creighton was respected for being the first tank commander to break through the German lines to relieve the encircled American forces inside Bastogne, during the Battle of the Bulge. To the surprise of many he decided upon a change of strategy, switching the focus from the 'big battalion' 'search and destroy' operations and putting an emphasis on pacification. His aim was to gradually hand over the main operations to the developing ARVN, giving it all the required artillery and air support necessary, whilst the remaining US forces concentrated on small-scale operations in conjunction with the South Vietnamese local forces. However, under constant political pressure from Washington, his relations with President Nixon became strained, and the forced withdrawal of troops did not sit well with him. Frustrated, General Abrams left Vietnam on 30 June 1972 to take over as Army Chief of Staff, during the height of the North Vietnamese offensive – but his role in the war was cannot be overstated. He was succeeded by his Deputy General, Frederick C. Weyand, who had been involved in Vietnam affairs for a long time, having commanded the 25th Infantry Division and been a member of the US delegation sent to negotiate with the North Vietnamese in 1969.

US advisory teams also came under MACV command and in 1969 there were 11,000 advisors in South Vietnam. The advisory structure very closely paralleled that of Vietnamese military command and control organization – with the headquarters providing the advisory function to the ARVN JGS. Under this, a Regional Assistance Command (RAC) was assigned to each of the four ARVN Corps-Military Regions, and under the US RAC Commander (usually a Major General) were two types of advisory teams – province advisory teams and division advisory teams. Each province was headed by a South Vietnamese colonel, and his American counterpart was the province senior advisor who controlled the District and Territorial Forces advisory teams. The province team was responsible for advising the province chief in both civil and military aspects of the ongoing pacification and development programs. In addition to province advisory teams, there was a Division Combat Assistance Team (DCAT) deployed to each South Vietnamese infantry division. Elite units, such as the Airborne Rangers and Marines, were generally organized along the same lines as regular ARVN units. In 1970 a new program dispatched more than 350 five-man advisory teams to train the Territorial Forces that carried out most of the fighting against the Viet Cong. The American advisors were assigned to ARVN battalions, but numbers decreased in 1972 with America's withdrawal from the country. With this, advisors now only operated at divisional and regimental levels apart from in the Marine Division where they continued at battalion level. By January 1972 there were only 5,416 American advisors in the whole of South Vietnam.

Actually being an advisor was no easy task and required a great

The first South Vietnamese Patton unit – the 20th Tank Squadron – was set up in March 1972, just in time to face the communist invasion across the DMZ. (ARVN)

deal of diplomacy because they were not there to directly command a South Vietnamese unit, but only to assist its commanders in both tactical and logistical matters. In order to clear up the chain of command and to clarify who was in authority, an advisor was usually a rank lower that the ARVN officer he was advising – which meant that the working relationship varied according to the characters involved and their ability to work together. The cultural differences played an important role for many US advisors whom had little, if no, Vietnamese cultural background. The ARVN officer was supposed to speak English fluently but in many cases, the advisor needed a translator. The military experience of both sides also played an important role because advisors often found their ARVN counterparts lacking in professional standards, whilst South Vietnamese officers resented the lack of combat experience. Many US advisors pointed out the incompetence of AVRN officers, whilst the South Vietnamese found the advisors arrogant, disrespectful, and often dismissive. The high turnover of US advisors – usually deployed for just six months – meant they had little time to develop a true working relationship, nor time to implement an operational improvement plan. Seeing the Americans departing, and feeling that the United States was doing things wrongly, made it very difficult for the advisor to get the South Vietnamese to 'toe the line'. Problems tended to worsen as the quality of the advisor fell with the accelerating US withdrawal. Furthermore, the advisor was required to asses his 'counterpart', which influenced his future career. This distorted working relationship was made even harder by the secret negotiations that went on between the North Vietnamese and the Nixon administration, because the South Vietnamese felt they were being ignored – ensconsed in a professional, and sometimes racial, superiority complex. Nevertheless, the advisor usually became the liaising focal-point, and therefore an important asset who had direct access to US air support.

Although fewer American soldiers were left operating on the ground in combat roles, US air support still played an essential role. At the height of the war, more than 350 USAF jet fighters were based in South Vietnam – with US Navy and USMC air support also available – but with the pull-out, many of these aircraft had been redeployed and only 83 USAF fighter bombers remained in early 1972. The workhorse was the F-4 Phantom II, but there was also a squadron of A-37Bs and AC-119K gunships. There were additional 156 F-4D/Es based in Thailand, along with16 F-105Gs, 15 A-1s and 13 AC-130s. Some 52 B-52 bombers were also based at U-Tapao, Thailand. Operating off the coast of South Vietnam were two US Navy attack carriers – the USS *Hancock* and *Coral Sea* – each with an air wing of some 90 aircraft. The air assets were bolstered by a wing of USAF C-130 transports and numerous US Army aviation helicopters units, including AH-1G attack helicopters.

By early April 1972, US Army ground combat units comprised: 196th Light Infantry Brigade in Da Nang; the 3rd Brigade; and 1st Cavalry at Bien Hoa, near Saigon. The latter unit had become a separate brigade following the departure of the bulk of the division from Vietnam in early 1971. There was also only four cavalry battalions still in the country, which were actually airmobile infantry with several aviation units, such as the 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion with F Troop; 9th Cavalry; F Battery; and 79th Aerial Rocket Artillery. Also, the only remaining aviation assets were the 11th Aviation Group in the ARVN I Corps, and the 17th Aviation Group in the II Corps.

The South Korean forces

Since 1964 the Republic of Korea (ROK) had deployed troops to South Vietnam and maintained the second largest foreign contingent after the United States: the Capital Division (Tiger); the 9th Division (White Horse); and the 2nd Marine Brigade (Blue Dragoon). With support units as well as army aviation, air force and navy miscellaneous units, South Korea deployed 50,000 troops at the height of its involvement. The ROK units were assigned to the ARVN II Tactical Corps Zone and the communist dominated Bin Dinh Province, where they often had the upper hand. However, they showed little interest in pacification as was shown with brutal acts of reprisals against villages suspected of supporting communist sympathizers.

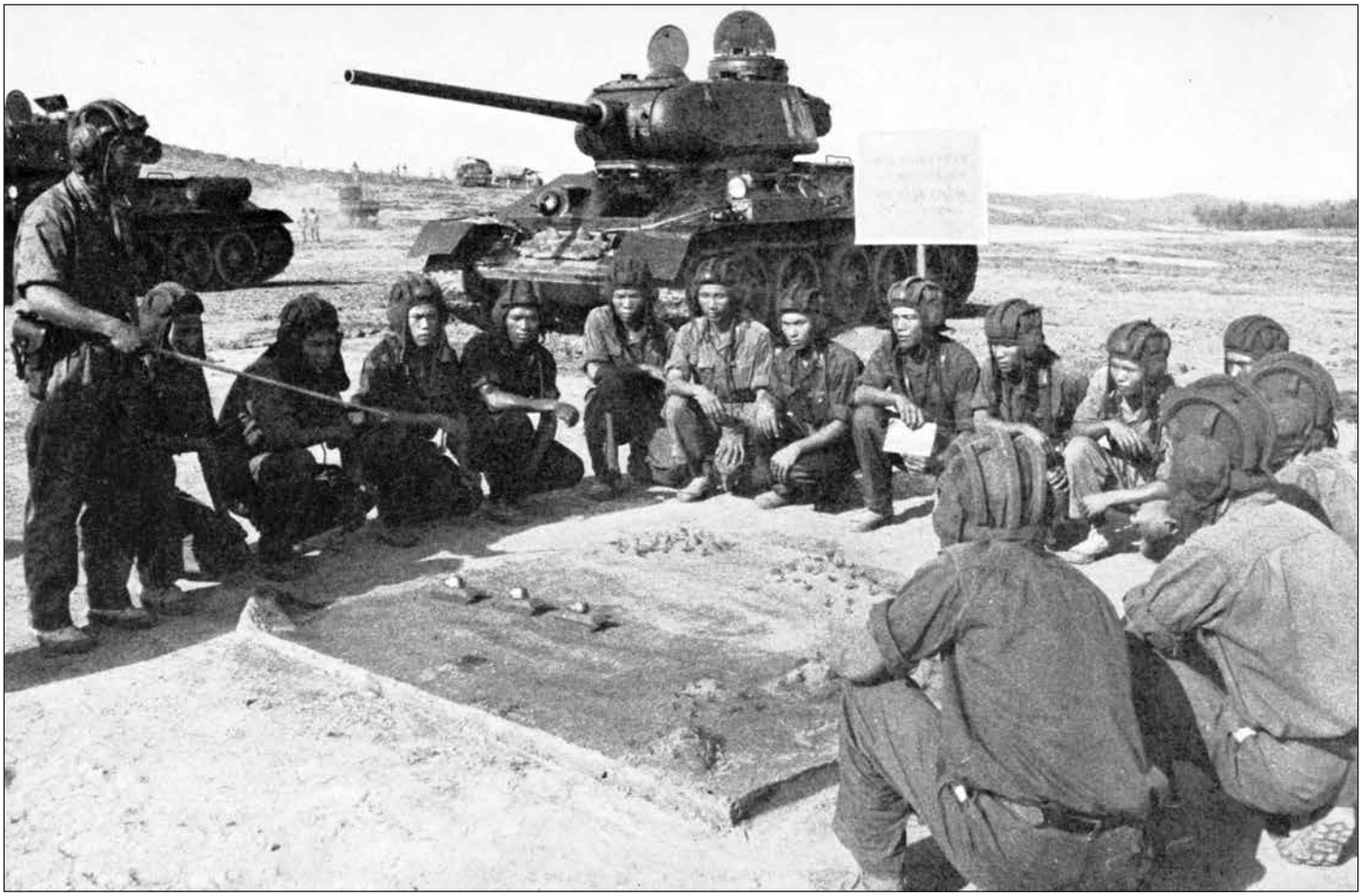
ROK expeditionary forces also gradually withdrew with the adoption of the Vietnamization program. The Philippines, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand all withdrew troops during this period, and it was indeed the ROK Capital Division that were the first to depart, followed in February 1972 by the 2nd Marine Brigade. However, South Korean troops stayed longer than any other ally due to pressure from Washington to maintain a sizable allied force to bolster the ARVN. Yet, the South Koreans did so reluctantly with Seoul giving secret instructions to local ROK commanders to avoid additional losses whilst waiting for a political agreement to the conflict. Thus, even if ROK forces still amounted to 36,760 troops by January 1972, they were usually bunkered in their positions and conducted only sparse security operations. Even when nearby ARVN units requested their cooperation, they usually ignored the cries, which only exacerbated the mistrust that already existed between the South Vietnamese and South Koreans.

CHAPTER 3
THE COMMUNIST FORCES

Since the failure of the Tet Offensive in 1968, the main PAVN units had evolved into a modern mechanized force, which had been the goal ever since communist insurrection back in 1945. However, the war with France delayed progress and it wasn't until the end of 1954 when the 'new' North Vietnam stabilized, that real progress was made and its strength rooted. The ceasefire resulting from the Geneva Accords led to the regrouping of opposing forces from each side of the now divided Vietnam. Thus, the Viet Minh communist units operating in central and southern parts of the country, as well as those inside Laos and Cambodia, were evacuated under international supervision to North Vietnam. The regular PAVN battle corps then amounted to some 330,000 infantry – the core of which was six infantry divisions that operated in Tonkin with a 'heavy' artillery-engineer division, and six independent infantry regiments that defeated the French at the Dien Bien Phu Battle but, by 1956, the arrival of troops from the other areas, combined with new deliveries of equipment from China and Soviet Union, helped to create eight new infantry divisions, three artillery divisions and an anti-aircraft artillery division. New bases for an air force and a navy were built and, for the first time, the standardization of all equipment and weapons was implemented – meaning that the PAVN was growing dramatically. Compared to a division fighting the French, a new one had two to three times its former firepower. However, the burden placed upon the economy of a war-ravaged country meant that the nation was simultaneously engaged in major social upheaval, which proved too much to bear. Consequently, the North Vietnamese scaled back their army and the PAVN was thus reduced to seven infantry divisions of only 8,689 men; six infantry brigades of four battalions; and one anti-aircraft battalion of 3,500 men. Also, four artillery brigades, as well as 10 anti-aircraft regiments and two radar regiments, were placed under the control of the Air Defense Command.

However, by the end of the 1950s the escalating conflict and the decision of Hanoi leaders to revive the guerrilla war in the South, forced the PAVN into massive expansion once again. More and more PAVN troops were thus drafted into South Vietnam: first in order to bolster the local Viet Cong units, then to replace them, even if they usually did leave their heavy equipment in the North. The departing units were considered 'clones' of the original division which kept its basic organizational structures, and which continued to recruit replacement troops and train them. The 'clone' unit was then renumbered according to its original parent unit. This kind of practice was also used in order to confuse the enemy – and to this end, a second 'clone' of 320B Division was created.

North Vietnam was administratively divided into four military regions, whilst South Vietnam was organised into five military regions and subsequently into Military Theaters (Fronts): the B1 Front covered the coastal zone expanding from Da Nang to Cam Ranh; the B2 Front covered the COSVN operational area; the B3 Front covered the Central



These North Vietnamese tank crewmen are attending a tactical class where a sand table and models are used. (PAVN)

Highlands area; the B4 Front covered from the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) to the Hai Van Pass, south of Hue; and the B5 Front covered the DMZ itself and the southern part of North Vietnam. In contrast to the fragmented South Vietnamese command structures, the North Vietnamese were centralized and disciplined, under the grip of the Communist Party. The PAVN was headed by the Central Military Commission (CMC) under High Command, an institution led by the Office of the Commander-in-Chief and the Chief of Staff – the equivalent to the ARVN JGS. The former was commanded by Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap, who also acted as Defense Minister, and the latter post was held by Colonel General Van Tien Dung.

The PAVN organized an exhibition in Hanoi at the end of 1971 for the North Vietnamese officials where they showed all the new equipment, including a PT-76B; a Type 63; a T-34-85; a T-54; and a ZSU-57-2 anti-aircraft armor. (PAVN)

Senior General Giap was the founder of the PAVN and gained notoriety for beating the French at Dien Bien Phu, and Dung had been his faithful deputy since the end of the 1940s. Senior General Giap's position had eroded slightly with the death of his mentor Chairman Ho Chi Minh in 1969, but he was still in control of all North Vietnamese military and was a firm believer in the need for developing PAVN capabilities focused on 'counter-offensive' phases with coordinated guerrilla operations. Soldiers often found Senior General Giap's plans difficult to follow but he was a master tactician and firmly believed in developing the PAVN. In 1969 this expansion began with the establishment of the Military Science Institute, set up to expand the armored force whilst producing training documents covering combined-arms operations in mountainous areas, fortified positions and important cities.

The first failed attempt to create armored units was in 1953 when the Viet Minh High Command decided to expand its transports, which consisted of some 250 trucks donated by China in 1951, by merely adding armor to them. Mechanics and drivers were then selected and sent to the Wu Ming armored school, near Canton, where they were trained by the Chinese on Japanese Type 95 and American M5 Stuart tanks. However, the training program was suspended and the personnel sent back to Vietnam to form anti-tank units with rocket-launchers and recoilless guns. The PAVN finally set up an armored company in 1955 for training purposes where they used captured vehicles, including three M24 tanks and 12 M8 armored cars and M3 half-tracks. That unit was temporarily supported by the North Vietnamese Navy which was the only branch of the forces that had the necessary technical support. Simultaneously, around 202 men were sent for training to China.

However, the first T-34-85 tanks were not put into service until October 1959 with the creation of the Armor School, and the first operational unit, the 202nd Armored Regiment, was then created in July 1960 at Vinh Yen. The regiment was equipped with the T-34-85 tanks delivered by the Soviets as well as the Chinese, in addition to 16 SU-76Ms self-propelled guns. Until 1975, the battalion remained at the basic operating level and attached to particular Fronts for specific campaigns. Usually each battalion was 'standardized' to a single type of vehicle, but as the armored units developed it was not uncommon to see one battalion with a mix of tanks such as the T-34-85s and PT-76s. Some units even operated both tanks and APCs showing their developing arsenal. The 203rd Armored Regiment was set up in June 1965, and also created was a Directory of the Armor Corps within the PAVN General Staff in order to supervise the expansion of the armored units. The 202nd Regiment now had one battalion of T-54s, two of T-34-85s, and one of PT-76s. The 203rd Regiment had two battalions of T-34-85s and one of PT-76s. In addition, each regiment also had two motorized infantry companies of BTR-50 APCs and trucks; one reconnaissance company of BTR-40s; and one self-propelled anti-aircraft company of ZSU-57-2s, and BTR-40As. There were also five independent companies of PT-76s and SU-76s.

At the same exhibition various vehicles delivered by the Soviet Union were also presented, along with vehicles delivered by Warsaw Pact countries and China. The vehicle in the foreground is an ATS-59 tracked artillery tractor. (PAVN)

However, further expansion of the armored units was halted with the intervention of the US in Vietnam because the Americans had far superior firepower. Instead, the armor was kept in North Vietnam in case of direct US invasion. With this decision, the North Vietnamese brought in a 'doctrine of use' where tanks would only be deployed to support infantry, in specific actions. Emphasis was given to stealth and the units were trained in extensive camouflage measures, not only of the vehicles but also the places where they were stored. Night fighting and displacement measures were also trained in order to reduce tank vulnerability to enemy airpower. This drilling would prove itself on many occasions when the North Vietnamese were able to deploy dozens of tanks, over hundreds of miles, without being detected.

The North Vietnamese engineer units grew to support the logistical effort. Amphibious vehicles, like this Soviet GAZ-46 light truck, were particularly useful in a country crisscrossed with waterways. (PAVN)

Over 100 T-34-85s were still in service by early 1972 but faced M41 Walker Bulldogs, which were very potent adversaries. (PAVN)

The T-54 and its Chinese Type 59 formed the main North Vietnamese battle tanks. (PAVN)

In order to offset American and South Vietnamese air superiority the PAVN developed night fighting tactics. (PAVN)

Even if the North Vietnamese were unwilling to deploy their armor units before the Easter Offensive of 1972, they did use them on several occasions before that date. The first instance was in Laos when the Soviets delivered PT-76 light tanks to Captain Kong Le, who rebelled against the Royal Lao Government and had temporarily allied with the local Pathet Lao communists. The North Vietnamese helped train, maintain, and in most cases manned the vehicles. Laos would indeed be a testing ground for the PAVN tank deployment and it was during the infamous battle of Khe Sanh, during the Tet Offensive of 1968, that the communist tanks met their first real challenge. The position, near the Laotian border on Route 9, held by the 26th Marine/III Marine Amphibious Force, posed a threat to the communist depots and trails and was attacked to distract the Americans from a massive offensive against Hue City.

The 198th Armored Battalion 22 PT-76s with elements of Divisions 304, 320, 324B and 325C – along with five artillery and three antiaircraft regiments – began its journey south on 1 October 1967, traveling only at night on different routes of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The camouflaged parking areas used by the tanks were bombed four times and several vehicles damaged but all of them were repaired and the whole unit arrived undetected after seven weeks of travel. The battalion was assigned to the western part of the front, with orders to help destroy the last enemy outposts along Route 9. The first attack continued on the other side of the border against a Laotian Army outpost at Ban Houei Sane on 23 January 1968. Many had falsely believed that the North Vietnamese would never actually attack because of previous air-support campaigns, including Operation Niagara at Khe San, where over 100,000 tons of bombs were dropped within three months. Furthermore, the Lang Vei base was ringed by acoustic and seismic detectors so any North Vietnamese activity would, in theory, be quashed.

It was in these difficult circumstances that the North Vietnamese tankers had to prepare their battle at Khe Sanh. It took 12 days for the PAVN to approach, ensuring the tanks went undetected to less than four kilometers of the position. The assault was finally launched with 16 PT-76s on 6 February 1968 in support of three infantry battalions and two sapper companies equipped with tear gas and flamethrowers. Throughout the night the battle raged and, as the outpost fell, even if they paid a heavy price, the North Vietnamese tanks had followed orders and stunned the Americans to conquer a fortified position. The PAVN commanders learnt a lot from this and later decided to attack Ben Het. This position was 13km from the Laotian border and the 175mm self-propelled guns positioned there posed a massive threat to PAVN truck traffic. However, the attack carried out by the 4th Battalion of the 202nd Regiment on 3 March 1969, with 10 PT-76s and 10 BTR-50s, was a failure. Lack of good intelligence meant a platoon of M48s of the 69th Armor went unnoticed and as the North

The main drawback facing the PAVN armored forces was their lack of mechanized infantry to support the tank units. The main APC in service was the Chinese K-63 (YW-531). (PAVN)

This BTR-152 leaves for the South, armed with quad- ZPU-4 14.5mm heavy machine guns. (PAVN)

Vietnamese took position, they were engaged by US Pattons, in the only tank-versus-tank battle of the war. Regardless of this failure, the PAVN gradually expanded its tank force and in the late 1960s the Soviets delivered over 100 PT-76s and dozens of new T-54s – along with China's T-34-85s, SU-100s and ISU-122s.

With this, the North Vietnamese now concentrated their armored operations in the less well defended Laotian battlefield, and as early as June 1968 the 1st Armored Battalion successfully defeated Muong Soui on Front 139, at the Plain of Jars. A year later, it was again engaged on the same sector, reinforced by a company of PT-76s from the 202nd Regiment but this time they suffered heavy losses during the counter-offensive (Operation Kou Kiet/About Face) and lost practically all its 25 PT-76s. This was the tank Corps' heaviest defeat and in light of this embarrassment the North Vietnamese reorganized their forces, launching the 312nd and 316th Divisions on the Plain of Jars in February 1970 – backed by the 195th Armored Group with PT-76s, BTR-50s and BTR-40s. By the end of the month, the communists had reoccupied the whole area.

The next PAVN tank operation occurred during the ARVN attempt to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1971, with Operation Lam Son 719. North Vietnamese intelligence had predicted the main axis of advance and had carefully studied the terrain and found it suitable for a major tank engagement. Furthermore, the enemy only comprised of ARVN troops with less firepower than regular American forces, and even if the South Vietnamese was covered by US airpower, they would operate far from their logistical bases in unknown and difficult terrain. The communists however had the luxury of nearby depots and bases and for the first time they would operate on an army Corps scale. These troops included the 70B Army Corps, 304th, 308th, 320th and 324th Divisions; four independent regiments; eight artillery regiments, as well as two battalions from the 202nd Armored Regiment; and a battalion of the 203rd Regiment.

When the ARVN offensive began, its initial pace along Route 9 was slow due to the condition of the road – which was long abandoned and had been badly damaged by numerous air strikes. The South Vietnamese deployed the 1st Division to shield their southern flank whilst the northern flank was the responsibility of the Airborne Division and the Rangers. The Paratrooper outposts were immediately encircled and attacked in mid-February by the 308th Division, supported by some 88 PT-76s, T-34-85s and T-54s. Twenty-four other tanks were held back in reserve. The ARVN positions were supported by M41 tanks that had linked up, and thus the first communist assaults were repelled, whilst the South Vietnamese tankers claimed no fewer

The main North Vietnamese force by 1972 consisted of regular motorized divisions made up of well-trained and motivated troops. This soldier of the 304th Division shows the standard PAVN infantry equipment, with his typical AK-47 webbing bandolier. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese elite Dac Cong assault sapper units were something of a shock infantry and Special Forces unit, specializing in infiltration, long-range reconnaissance and sabotage. They usually received better infantry equipment like these Soviet steel helmets. (PAVN)

than six T-54s and 16 PT-76s in their first tank encounter with the North Vietnamese. After ARVN air assault operations around the town of Tchepone, the South Vietnamese were finally forced to retreat along Route 9 at the end of March. The 324th Division, supported by six companies of tanks, slipped to the southern sector in pursuit of the retreating columns and were turned on. Fifty-four M41 tanks, 87 M113 APCs and 600 trucks were destroyed and the victory over the ARVN heartened PAVN commanders, reinforcing their confidence in being able to wage conventional mechanized operations. However, the fighting also highlighted some long-vexing deficiencies in terms of coordination between infantry, tanks and artillery. The ARVN tank men were also tactically superior and had also shown gunnery superiority.

The PAVN High Command decided to tackle these problems by improving tank unit training as well as intensifying combined arms exercises. Simultaneously, new armor units were being created thanks to deliveries of vehicles from China and the Soviet Union under the supervision of the Armor Command, led by Major General Nguyen The Lan. These deliveries not only replaced 100 armor losses suffered in Laos but also brought the PAVN inventory to an estimated 650 tanks and 300 APCs, and armored cars. In total, some 180 tanks had been delivered by China in 1970 and 1971. Yet, at the eve of the Easter Offensive, the PAVN deployed some 350 T-54s and Type 59s, 100 T-34-85s, and over 200 PT-76s and Type 63s. Most of the APCs were the Chinese K-63s (YW-531s) with Soviet-built BTR-50s and BTR-152s. There were also some SU-76s, SU-100s and ISU-122s self-propelled guns. Official North Vietnamese publications indicated that more tanks had been introduced in early 1972 than between 1965–1971. The Technical Department of the Armor Command had now also fully opened its new workshops in Hanoi to bring vehicles to optimum standard. They also adapted vehicles to suit local working conditions, or even improve the original design, like lightening the steering rods of the T-54s or fitting transmission to the Chinese Type 702 voice communication device. Around 24 T-34 tanks were locally modified with a twin 37mm anti-aircraft gun, while most of the BTR-50s were fitted with a ZU-23-2 twin 23mm anti-aircraft gun on their rear decks – which came in addition to the ZSU-57-2 self-propelled anti-aircraft vehicles.

For the first time, the Armor Command now also received top priority in terms of recruitment at high schools, universities and even in the Communist Cadre School. A new accelerated training syllabus was put in place which graduated tank men in only three months, with additional advanced courses of six or nine months. Some 724 armor officers as well as 233 armor technical cadres graduated in 1972. The Armor School was expanded to include the Armor Group 10, which later evolved into the 207th Armored Regiment, a training unit held as a reserve in North Vietnam. Some 3,000 officers and other specialists were also sent back to North Vietnam after their training in the Soviet Armor Academy of Odessa. If the South Vietnamese complained about the stresses of expansion, the North Vietnamese put an even greater strain on their own troops in order meet the deadline of the coming offensive. The PAVN High Command itself was acutely aware that many personnel were not trained sufficiently, and with this, the number of armored battalions rose from eight to 16 in less than a year. These were now the 201st, 202nd, 203rd, and 207th Armored Regiments. The number of mechanized troops in APC was also augmented by setting up independent companies that could be attached to a larger unit for specific operations. However, it was found that even though the arrangement was unsuitable, it was the best that could be done with the limited number of APCs at hand. Finally, it was decided that the 202nd Armored Regiment would be turned into a mechanized unit with two tank battalions of T-54s and T-34-85s, and two mechanized battalions of Type 63 amphibious tanks and APCs. The 203rd Armored Regiment was considered a 'heavy' unit with four battalions, equipped with T-54s and Type 59s.

By crosschecking American, South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese sources, it is likely that the PAVN armor order of battle in April 1972 was as follows:

- 201st Armored Regiment with the 171A, 171B and 297th Armored Battalions.

A propaganda photo showing the Soviet LPO-5 flamethrower, which was usually used by sapper assault teams. (PAVN)

- 202nd Mechanized Regiments with the 198th and 397th Armored Battalions, and the 66th and 244th Mechanized Battalions.
- 203rd Armored Regiment with the 3rd, 4th, and 512th Armored Battalions.
- 195th Armored Battalion attached to Front 959 operating in the Plain of Jars in Laos.
- 6th Armored Battalion attached to the Logistic Army 559 for the protection of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Southern Laos.
- The 20th and 21st Armored Battalions attached to the B2 Front.
- 10th Armor School with the Training Armor and the 177th Armor Battalions.
- Twelve unidentified independent companies of between 12 to 15 vehicles each of PT-76s and Type 63 light tanks, BTR-50 and BTR-152 APCs, BTR-40 armored cars and SU-76M, SU-100 and ISU-122 self-propelled guns.
- The 510th Armored Anti-Aircraft Group with 11 companies of BTR-40As, ZSU-37-2s, and ZSU-57-2s.

However, the motorization phase did not run smoothly even if the number of trucks available rose from 20,000 in 1970 to 29,000 in 1972. Many North Vietnamese divisions could not be upgraded and trained on schedule because they were already deployed, and the PAVN then found it difficult to create units ready for the new form of mechanized and combined arms operations. Mobile training teams were sending units forward whilst other regiments or divisions rotated back into North Vietnam for refitting. Only the units of the Strategic Reserve stationed in North Vietnam could really be considered a success within the timeframe. They were initially the 304th, 308th, 312th and 320th Divisions. The 325th and 320B Divisions were converted from reinforcement training divisions into mobile motorized divisions directly under the control of the High Command. The 316th Division was recalled from Laos and refitted. They saw their ranks boosted by the attachment of additional artillery units directly from the North. In addition to the standard training program, each division focussed on training in combat tactics appropriate to its own specific combat missions and special aptitudes. For example, in the B2 Front sector, the 7th Division trained in mobile operations; the 5th Division developed siege techniques; whilst the 9th Division specialized in urban warfare. Reserve artillery under the Artillery Command was increased from three to five regiments and these units were equipped with long-range 122mm and 130mm guns, BM-14 and BM-24 multiple rocket launchers (MRL) and 160mm mortars. There were also nine independent artillery regiments assigned to the different Military Fronts, equipped with 152mm guns and howitzers, 122mm and 105mm howitzers, 85mm guns, BM-13 and Type 107 MRLs, and 120mm mortars. The North Vietnamese deployed some 1,200 artillery tubes by early 1972.

On 24 August 1971, the CMC and the Ministry of Defense organized an all-armed forces training class under Senior General Giap. Over 300 high-ranking officers from military units, staff agencies and military schools attended – and during a month's study, the attending officers were given a number of new doctrines relating to the command of combined arms campaigns. The purpose was to improve their tactical expertise based on experiences like the Battle of Khe Sanh, the defeat of the ARVN Operation Lam Son 719 in Laos, and the latest fighting in the Central Highlands. Training was also increased at lower level, and by the end of 1970 the General Staff sent many cadre groups to the different battlefields to work with the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) and the military regions to provide guidance for this new phase of PAVN development. However, these inspecting tours revealed that many deficiencies still existed relating to combine-arms cooperation. As events would later prove, the armored regiments were still insufficiently trained in complex combined operations because they rarely had occasion to operate at regimental nor at Corps level.

It was thus decided in March 1970 to reorganize and bolster the different military training institutions in order to meet the requirements of the expanding army and to negate the losses suffered in fighting. The number of schools thus increased from 10 to 16 from 1970 to 1972 and initial training was increased for all soldiers – the Artillery Officers' School reinstituted long-term initial training programs lasting three years for entry-level cadre and 18 months for mid-level cadre. In 1971, the number of students at these different schools rose to 20,000, including more than 1,000 political officers and 7,000 specialized technical officers. Every year a total of 7,000 students graduated from the entry-level and the supplementary training schools in technical fields. The same year, the Military Technical University had trained 1,056 new engineers in such specialized fields as radio, radar, and missile ordnance.

With this, the High Command feverishly launched another series of exercises in order to train as many officers as possible in this new kind of warfare, which culminated in an exercise held in November 1971 involving the 308th Division together with the 202nd and 203rd Armored Regiments, carried out against a simulated fortified position defended by an enemy brigade at Xuan Mai. Here, the Armor Command decided to split its Command Post (CP) into two structures – a 'rear' CP with the administrative, logistical and training tasks in North Vietnam – and a 'forward' CP which was in charge of deploying armor officers. These officers would later advise the Fronts and Divisional Headquarters, supervise the attached armored units and help the local infantry commanders deal with new assets.

Nevertheless, despite all these difficulties, the PAVN modernization process continued unabated and led to a force of some 16 divisions and four armored regiments by early 1972. This meant some 537,000 men, including 104,000 'regulars', officially belonged to the Viet Cong, but in reality was made up of North Vietnamese troops, and reinforced by 500,000 men serving with the Logistic Command and the Anti-Aircraft Defense Command. They were also supplemented by Militia Command with roughly two million men and women, including 870,000 light infantry, with the others serving in the anti-aircraft artillery or logistic units in the North. Three divisions and 26,000 guerrillas were officially part of the COSVN, the military wing of the National Liberation Front (NLF), a fictitious designation allocated to the Viet Cong for propaganda purposes. Within the Viet Cong itself

The training of a gun crew with a battery of ZU-23-2 23mm AA guns which could inflict heavy losses on low-flying enemy aircraft. (PAVN)

A new weapon introduced into service during the Easter Offensive was the Sa-7 MANPAD missile. (PAVN)

A group of North Vietnamese officers attending courses at the Soviet Army Kalinin Artillery Academy of Leningrad. The ARVN and their American advisors rated the PAVN artillerymen highly. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

though, morale was faltering – arousing suspicion over their reliability – and Hanoi was now forced to bolster their dwindling ranks too.

Hanoi also turned its attention towards the Vietnam People's Air Force (VPAF) which was a small but capable force of 250 fighters (MiG-17/19/21) in four regiments but used only for the defense of North Vietnam itself. It was part of a larger Air Defense Command of 7,000 anti-aircraft guns and manning over 300 SAM sites. They were predominantly deployed in the North, around Hanoi and Haiphong, as well as the Red River Valley Delta but at least three of its anti-aircraft divisions were redeployed to the South to cover units in the upcoming offensive. This would be the first time the US and VNAF had come across such a level of anti-aircraft weapons, including radar-directed 57mm and 85mm AA guns, SAM-2 missiles and new man-portable (MANPAD) SAM-7s. The small PAVN Navy had about 3,000 men and were used only limitedly for the security of territorial waters.

Throughout the conflict, Hanoi succeeded in maintaining a high degree of motivation amongst troops through an effective propaganda campaign, and the newly introduced heavy weapons (along with the extensive training) made for good reading – making the North Vietnamese a formidable force. The PAVN expansion process continued throughout the Easter Offensive, despite huge losses, and the number of regular battalions rose from 149 in 1969 to 285 in December 1972. Some 3,000 Soviet advisors and technicians also supported the expanding PAVN, with dozens of Chinese, Cubans and other Warsaw Pact personnel.

CHAPTER 4
PRELUDE TO THE STORM

The North Vietnamese plan

The North Vietnamese began drafting plans for the offensive against the South in October 1971, where the Politburo Central Office aimed to take the strategic initiative by military offensive and during negotiations taking place in Paris. The purpose of the campaign was to smash the South Vietnamese pacification program and to expand the communist-controlled areas. However, even if America was withdrawing from the war, it worried North Vietnam that Washington would intervene again – though it was their firm belief that no additional US ground forces would be re-introduced. Indeed, they rightly assumed that the political position of the White House was weakened and that President Nixon would only resort to the use of airpower, as he had done during the last months. They also believed following Operation Rolling Thunder that they could now withstand and adapt to any new US air campaigns. The final decision to launch the coming offensive was made in early March 1972 following Politburo Directive 43. The PAVN was readying itself for a spring campaign but some argued that it would be preferable to wait a few months until all US forces had withdrawn, thus minimizing the risks. However, North Vietnamese leaders wanted to take on the Americans and show the world they had the strength to defeat them. If the South Vietnamese were badly defeated while American forces were still there, Hanoi would claim a major political victory.

With this, Senior General Giap presented his battle-plan to the Central Military Commission, outlining a risky strategy which went against the normal PAVN thinking. Instead of concentrating the majority of his forces on a single-stroke offensive across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separated the two Vietnams, he instead planned a three-pronged offensive which would secure more real-estate, whilst fragmenting and splitting ARVN forces. He reasoned that without massed troops and with no real reserves, the South Vietnamese could hardly stand up to the armor-led PAVN assaults. The Nguyen Hue Offensive consisted of sequential phases that were designed to surprise the South Vietnamese into submission. For phase one, Giap decided to take the offensive on the remote border areas of both the ARVN MR I, just south of the DMZ; around Loc Ninh, near the Cambodian border in MR III; and MR II, around Dak To-Kontum, in the Central Highlands. His intention was to draw out ARVN forces near PAVN logistic bases and sanctuaries, and then move North Vietnamese units to areas near Hue, Saigon and the Binh Dinh coast in MR II.

Senior General Giap wanted to progress slowly though, as he

PAVN Lieutenant General Dong Sy Nguyen was commander of 559th Group and remains one of their lesser known high-ranking officers. He played a leading role in the ultimate victory of the North Vietnamese and was involved in logistical organization and controlling the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail. He is seen here in a Soviet steel helmet inspecting a group of truck drivers, who themselves are wearing East German helmets. (PAVN)

A group of North Vietnamese drivers receive their last instructions before venturing down Ho Chi Minh Trail. The PAVN took great care to protect these personnel who received the best clothing and equipment – like these Soviet helmets and flak jackets. Their heavily camouflaged vehicles, seen in the background, were Soviet ZIL-130 trucks of 5-ton load-carrying capacity. (PAVN)

One of the most efficient USAF assets was the AC-130E/H gunship. This AC-130E belonged to the 16th Special Operation Squadron operating out of Ubon AB in Thailand. (USAF)

North Vietnamese destroyed trucks – probably Soviet ZIL-157s of 2.5-ton load-carrying capacity – as seen from an American FAC aircraft which was assessing damage following Spectre gunship attacks. (USAF)

One of the most specialized aircraft used in truck-hunting over the Ho Chi Minh Trail was the Martin B-57G. The variant of the US-built British Canberra bomber was fitted with a very sophisticated sensors package. This included Low Light Level Television (LLTV) and Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) cameras, as well as a laser target designator that was operated by the 13th Bomber Squadron out of Ubon AB in Thailand. (USAF)

himself doubted the final goal could be reached and was adamant that only as much territory as needed for negotiations should be taken. To have the element of surprise was vital to his plans and he chose mid-March as his launch date. He reasoned the weather would still favor the use of tanks and vehicles but if the offensive bogged down, the arrival of the wet season in early June would lessen the impact of US air power. His choice of March went against the advice of some members of his staff who preferred to start the offensive at the beginning of the dry season, which would have benefitted mechanized operations.

The communist logistic preparation

As always, Senior General Giap was logistically well prepared and had amassed enough equipment, munitions, and food for a high-intensity 27-month campaign. Hanoi requested the Soviets increase their fuel deliveries, which rose to 390,000 tons in 1971 and 145,000 tons more during the first four months of the following year. In order to bolster their positions in Laos and to protect their logistic corridor, the North Vietnamese launched a new offensive against the Plain of Jars in December 1971. In a lightning-quick campaign of three days, the 312nd and 316th Divisions, supported by the 195th Armored Battalion, swept away the Laotian forces and conquered the whole area. Further south, the 968th Division, spearheaded by the 4th Armored Battalion, now also occupied most of the Boloven Plateau. The fact that the communists were so organized proved that they had matured, which came as a big surprise to their enemy.

The 559th Group, under the command of General Dong Sy Nguyen, deployed at the Ho Chi Minh Trail and was brought up to full army strength. Initially the trail encompassed five Base Areas (BA), each with truck parks, command and control facilities, storage areas, barracks and hospitals. BA 604 was the main logistic hub in southern Laos, from where the coordination and distribution of men and supplies into South Vietnam's Military Region I and BAs further south was undertaken. BA 611 was a staging place between BA 604 to BA 609 as well as the BA 607 in the A Shau Valley. BA 612 was used in support of the B3 Front in the Central Highlands, together with the BA 614 which also channelled troops southward towards the ARVN MR III.

Of these, BA 609 was the most developed with a dense road network which could remain open during the rainy season. The North Vietnamese simultaneously built other roads further west, deeper inside Laos in their newly-controlled zones in order to reduce their vulnerabilities. To hide his deployment, Senior General Giap also pushed camouflage measures to an unprecedented level with

The Americans estimated that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was defended by over 1,500 flak guns. A 37mm AA gun fires on aircraft whilst a Soviet-built ZIL-157 truck passes by. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese made great efforts to clear the attacked logistic roads that were seeded with time-delayed fused bombs. One of the methods was using specially modified vehicles that generated a magnetic field. This poor, but very rare photo, shows a column of specially modified BTR-40 APCs of North Korean origin employed for this task. (PAVN)

the entire network concealed from aerial observation by an intricate system of camouflage. A truck could now drive over 800km without emerging from the canopy except to ford streams on submerged bridges, and the road and path network was now supported by river transportation, which allowed large quantities of supplies to be moved even during the rainy season. The Base Areas themselves were furthermore subdivided into stations or 'Binh Trams' that were the equivalent of a regimental logistic headquarters and responsible for securing a particular section of the network. Whilst separate units were tasked with security, engineer, and signal tasks, a Binh Tram provided the logistical necessities and were usually separated a day's march from one another. In order to prepare for the upcoming offensive, the 559th Group was reorganized at the end of 1970 into five divisional headquarters: the 470th, 471st, 472nd, 473rd and the 571st. Also under direct 559th Group control were three independent anti-aircraft artillery, eight engineer regiments, and four truck transportation regiments. In addition, some 8,500 trucks were allocated to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and they would travel along the 27 Binh Trams. The 968th Infantry Division was charged with defending the logistic network which included two Petroleum Pipeline regiments that had built and maintained the 1,000km pipeline. By 1971 it had reached the A Shau Valley in South Vietnam and fuel usage consequently jumped from 20,000 tons in 1969 to over 60,000 tons in 1971.

The South Vietnamese plan

The US and South Vietnamese commanders were fully aware that Hanoi was planning a full-scale nationwide offensive, but no-one could agree on its date and scope. For many, the communists would likely wait until the departure of the last US ground forces scheduled for early 1973 before launching any attack. Others believed that the offensive would take place not too far ahead of the US presidential election in November to weaken Washington, whilst some even hypothesized it would take place before May when the wet season started.

The previous months had certainly seen an upsurge in North Vietnamese operations but a consensus of opinion formed that Hanoi would not seek to provoke quite yet. Both the intelligence agencies attached to the MACV, the Pacific Command, as well as the NSA and the CIA, concurred. Only the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) rang the alarm when its analysts were disturbed by the level of enemy troop infiltrations. Failings in intelligence also added to the confusion because they badly underestimated the size of the new PAVN armored force. They presumed that Hanoi tanks amounted to only 160 vehicles whilst in reality it was four times that number. False security in Operation Commando Hunt VII – which mobilized some 226 fighter-bombers, 54 B-52 bombers and 18 AC-130 gunships – also meant the Americans were underestimating the resolve of the North Vietnamese. Between November 1971 and March 1972 some 28,500 tactical sorties dropped

Another North Vietnamese vehicle modified for clearing time-delayed fused bombs was this T-34 tank chassis. The magnetic field generator was mounted on the left side of its electrical power station. It is unknown how many of these vehicles had been built. (PAVN)

The fuel for the coming offensive was buried in storage tanks that were widely dispersed in 'tank farms' in order to reduce the impact of air strikes. These ZIL-157 trucks were loaded with some of these tanks moving down for the South. (PAVN)

In early March 1972, PAVN units deployed just north of the DMZ ready to attack across the border separating both Vietnams. This artillery battalion equipped with D-74 122mm guns is checked one last time before taking position at the frontline. Soviet KrAZ 255 'heavy trucks' were most often deployed. (PAVN)

67,800 tons of bombs whilst the B-52s dropped an additional 58,500 tons.

However, by now the North Vietnamese had reinforced their anti-aircraft defense assets considerably, doubling the number of flak battalions to 52 with over 1,500 AA guns. They had also set up the 367th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division to cover the southern part of North Vietnam and the DMZ area, as well as the 377th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division in charge of protecting the divisions heading down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Americans claimed an inflated 10,689 trucks had been destroyed for the price of their 28 aircraft. Indeed, the North Vietnamese did pay a heavy price and the 4,228 trucks lost which represented 59 percent of the entire fleet of vehicles belonging to the 559th Group, which was the heaviest rate of loss experienced in the conflict. Yet, even though it was now clear Hanoi would not have enough equipment to replace these losses, the offensive was still carried out, with the main axis of attack becoming the northern

sector across the DMZ. This confused the allied forces and when the PAVN 324B Division moved out from the A Shau Valley, the ARVN 1st Division counter-attacked, cemented in the belief that the North Vietnamese forces would be concentrated in the Central Highlands.

For years, allied commanders feared that the communists would overrun the Central Highlands and push down to the sea, joining forces with the local VC units as well as of the 3rd 'Gold Star' Division entrenched in the mountains – splitting South Vietnam into two. Saigon reacted to this paranoia by deploying the General Reserve for MR II, where the Paratroopers were sent to hold a series of fire-support bases on the 'Rocket Ridge' northwest of Kontum to screen the town from a direct attack by the North Vietnamese. Simultaneously, the 7th Air Force that controlled the air operations in South East Asia launched a series of B-52 strikes against the suspected enemy depots and rest areas of the 320th Division in November and December 1971. This was within the cadre of Operation Island Tree, where attacked targets were monitored by dropped acoustic sensors. Apart from that decision, the ARVN JGS took no other steps to counter or pre-empt any further enemy offensive. Despite intelligence warnings that a major communist offensive would take place at other key areas, the South Vietnamese commanders and their American advisors ignored this for months, instead focussing their minds on the apparent 'low activity' shown by aerial reconnaissance and electronic sensors. However, when aerial reconnaissance across the DMZ could no longer be ignored, General Abrams approved air strikes, targeting air defenses, troops, POL and ammunition depots situated in the 'Panhandle' – the southern part of North Vietnam. This was officially the first time Washington ordered air attacks across the 17th Parallel since November 1968. The 7th Air Force launched a five-day attack just after Christmas 1971, called Operation Proud Deep Alpha, that also targeted the Bai Thuong Airfield. Here, MiG-21s had forced the AC-130s out of some areas and severely damaged a B-52 – over 1,000 strike sorties were made. Yet the North Vietnamese kept resisting and on 16–17 February 1972, another series of strikes were ordered and Abrams also pressed President Thieu to release ARVN forces deployed around Krek, in Cambodia, to protect Saigon.

Again, the North Vietnamese were underestimated, with the Americans adamant that only 5,000 tons of supplies had been smuggled into the South, but in reality, the PAVN had actually amassed some 70,000 tons, 130,000 additional troops and dozens of tanks. Senior General Giap counted on this 'underestimation' and contrary to MACV and ARVN JGS 'predictions', the PAVN was preparing its most ambitious attack yet, with some 14 divisions, 26 separate regiments and all his artillery and tank resources prepped. By taking considerable camouflage measures, the movement of this impending attack went unnoticed from the sophisticated electronic and aerial reconnaissance sensors.

CHAPTER 5
INVASION ACROSS THE DMZ

Contrary to what allied commanders expected, the initial PAVN thrust was across the DMZ, with its main objective being Quang Tri – the northern provincial capital. Their goal covered a large area extending from the DMZ in the north, to Sa Huyh in the south – linking with Saigon across Route 1. Their objective was thinly populated and overlooked by the jungle-clad mountains of the Anamite Chains, and to its north lay the ancient capital, Hue, whilst on the south, Da Nang – the second largest city in the country. The region also led into the sea at the Hai Van Pass, and it was here that the PAVN Tri-Thien Theater (the amalgamation of the names 'Quang Tri' and 'Tri Thien' Provinces) coordinated both the B5 Front, just north of the DMZ, and the B4 Front, west of Quang Tri and Hue. The North Vietnamese based there were the 304th, 308th and 324B Divisions, with the 312th and 320th Divisions on standby along with five independent regiments, and one assault sapper regiment. They were supported by nine artillery regiments with 391 guns, including 70 M-46 130mm long-range guns and 36 multiple rocket launchers (MRL) mounted on trucks, as well as 13 battalions of signal and transportation troops. Providing the flak-protection were two anti-aircraft defense divisions with eight anti-aircraft artillery and two SAM regiments of SAM-2s; seven battalions; and 10 independent companies of anti-aircraft artillery.

Emphasizing the importance of this offensive, Senior General Giap deployed Major General Le Trong Tan, Deputy Chief of the General Staff, who was joined by Major General Le Quang Dao, who also served as Political Commissar. Senior General Giap even deployed his deputy, Van Tien Dung, to provide direct guidance, and accompanying him was Major General Nguyen The Lam, Commander of the PAVN Armored Corps. The PAVN faced the ARVN I Corps forward defenses – centered on the Quang Tri-Dong Ha area – and were the main focus of the campaign. The break into the enemy front was tasked to the 202nd and 203rd Armored Regiments, with 260 tanks and APCs. It would be the only place where North Vietnamese tanks would operate at regimental level, and two other divisions would also launch diversionary operations in southern MR I – the 711th Division in Quang Tin Province and the 2nd Division in Quang Ngai Province.

The offensive began at noon on 30 March 1972 when a massive artillery barrage rained down on the ARVN forward positions, just south of the DMZ. These PAVN artillerymen are manning D-74 122mm guns that outranged any South Vietnamese artillery pieces. (PAVN)

To hold the area, the ARVN I Corps could only draw on 35,000

South Vietnamese troops of the inexperienced 3rd Division duck in their shelter, facing the North Vietnamese artillery barrage along the DMZ. They were at the receiving end of over 300 communist guns. (ARVN)

These North Vietnamese engineer troops prepare to offload a section of pontoon bridge at the Ben Hai River that flowed through the DMZ. The bridge-carrier was a variant of the Soviet GAZ-63 truck. (PAVN)

regular troops where more than 80,000 US troops were deployed at the height of American involvement. Since 1968, the MR I was dotted with a system of supporting fire-bases (FSB), the most important being those located south of the DMZ and west of Hue where the most ferocious combat of the Tet Offensive occurred. Under the command of Major General Pham Van Phu, the 1st Division deployed along the western approaches of the town, anchored along FSB Camp Evans, FSB T-Bone and FSB Bastogne. The 2nd Division was split to cover each of the southern provinces and reinforced by six Ranger Battalions, but it was the defense of the most threatened sector facing the border of North Vietnam that posed the most problems. This area was the responsibility of the new 3rd Division under Commander Brigadier General Vu Van Giai and his Senior Advisor, Colonel Donald J. Metcalf, who were desperately trying to bring the under-strength division to full operational capacity. Its troops were young inexperienced conscripts and previous deserters, built around the 2nd Regiment which was formerly a component of the elite 1st Division, whilst two new regiments – 56th and 57th – were added. The 57th Regiment was deployed forward at FSB C1 north of Dong Ha, while the 2nd Regiment was entrenched at FSB Camp Carroll, covering the western approaches. Also under the supervision of the 3rd Division were the 147th and 258th Marine Brigades, placed over an arched ridge-line overlooking Route 9 (FSB Mai Loc) to the west, and Thach Hanh River (FSB Nancy) to the south. Three battalions of Regional Forces (RF), which manned a line of outposts facing the DMZ from Route 1 to the coastline, were also under the supervision of Commander Brigadier General Giai. The 1st Armored Brigade of Colonel Nguyen Trong Luat was placed under direct command of the I Corps and had been reshuffled after suffering heavy losses the previous year. It had four armored cavalry squadrons all equipped with M41 tanks and M113 APCs, whilst the newly raised 20th Tank Squadron, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu Ly, had just finished its training program and was on its last maneuver rehearsal.

Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam was overall commander of the ARVN I Corps but whilst he had good political acumen to excel in Saigon, he was a poor leader who failed disastrously during the Battle of Laos in 1971. He appeared unable to cope with the handling of complex combined-operations involving a mechanized Corps-sized thrust. However, a native of Hue, he had considerable political connections throughout MR I. The commander of the 1st RAC attached to ARVN I Corps was Major General Frederick J. Kroesen, who was in turn helped by his deputy, Major General Thomas Bowen, as well as Colonel Gerald Turley, the senior Marine advisor attached to the South Vietnamese Marine Division. Colonel Turley played an important role in the battle around Quang Tri, taking over from the faltering ARVN 3rd Division senior adviser, Colonel Donald J. Metcalf. Major General Kroesen himself was replaced on 30 May by Second World War and Korea War veteran, Brigadier General Howard H. Cooksey.

When thunder rolled

The element of surprise was vital to the North Vietnamese who took great care to hide the deployment of their units, which was usually done at night. In order to stay unnoticed, most of the armored battalions were held in rear positions until the last moment, and it was only at the end of February that the bulk of the tanks moved to their assembly points. They advanced in small 12km stages in radio blackout and immediately hid at prearranged and camouflaged parking areas. However, the movements had been made difficult due to unusually heavy rainfall that made some rivers impassable and had washed out bridges – notably on the Ben Hai, Cua Viet and Cam Lo rivers. At some places the rivers had grown to over 900 meters wide and thus barges were used to ferry tanks over the estuary of the Cua Viet, but strong tides still made crossing perilous. Nevertheless, some 150 tanks and 1,500 specially engineered vehicles, along with 350 guns were deployed along the border in the space of 15 days. By the end of March, practically all the armored battalions were in place along the border whilst their main logistical center was set up at the city port of Vinh. The 202nd Armored Regiment was reinforced by a company of 18 T-34 anti-aircraft self-propelled twin 37mm vehicles, whilst the 203rd Armored Regiment received a company of 18 ZSU-57-2s.

It was initially planned to hold a dusk assault on 30 March because

Troops of the 308th Division prepare to cross the DMZ on a sector northwest of the city of Dong Ha. They were supported by ZIS-485 amphibious trucks. (PAVN)

The offensive across the DMZ was spearheaded by two armored regiments. These Type 63s from the 66th Battalion of the 202nd Armored Regiment 'swim' across the Ben Hai River on the eastern part of the DMZ. (PAVN)

Once across the DMZ, the PAVN 126th Sapper Regiment progressed further south along the coast. It attacked the ARVN outposts near Gio Linh along Route 1 with the help of the Type 63s of the 66th Armored Battalion. (PAVN)

Further west along the DMZ, the assault was led by the 203rd Armored Regiment. The crews of these T-54s are receiving final instructions before moving to their departure positions. (PAVN)

The 308th Division rolled across mine fields at the DMZ. The motorized troops aboard GAZ-63 2-ton trucks speed up whilst covered against air attacks by an BTR-40A, armed with an ZPU-2 twin 14.5mm heavy machine gun. (PAVN)

of their superior night-battle training, whilst the darkening skies would inhibit American bombers. However, the forward ground observers indicated unusual enemy activity in the ARVN 3rd Division area as a rotary program to eliminate 'fire-base syndrome' was currently under way, which meant the 56th and 57th Regiments were exchanging positions, along with other units. The North Vietnamese

Sheltered from air attacks by mist, the T-54s of the 203rd Armored Regiment attacked due south across the DMZ in early April 1972. (PAVN)

commanders decided to risk it and advanced at 1130 which caught two of the three 3rd Division regiments on the move. The deployment was half completed by midday and their artillery regiments had fired 11,000 rounds, being joined by dozens of MRLs under poor weather that shielded the communist forces from allied air power. There was massive losses and outposts were immediately occupied by sapper teams. By midnight all the remaining fire-bases were surrounded and this PAVN artillery barrage had stunned the South Vietnamese soldiers who were not accustomed to such intense fighting, whilst the ARVN counter-battery was ineffective because they were unable to spot enemy positions. Furthermore, most of the South Vietnamese howitzers were out-ranged by the very precise M-46 130mm and D-74 122mm guns. This artillery fire was followed and coordinated by ground attacks, spearheaded by tanks and coming from the North across the DMZ, and the west through Khe Sanh staging area – which consisted of the 308th Division and three regiments of the B5 Front. They were directed against the positions of the 56th Regiment at FSB Fuller and FSB A4, and against the 57th Regiment at FSB A2 and FSB A1, north of Route 1.

PAVN engineer units also quickly opened three pathways through the mine fields across the DMZ, with the 31st and 27th Regiments crossing due south to attack the complex of outposts centered on Gio Linh along Route 1. The 126th Sapper Regiment progressed further east along the coast but were quickly taken out as it was becoming harder to organize the battlefield. In fact, it took several hours for 13 Type 63 amphibious tanks to cross Ben Hai River because the current was so strong. Therefore, the main breaching of the DMZ actually occurred on a sector northwest of Dong Ha. The 308th Division attack was supported by the 512th Armored Battalion who drove T-54s down a 33km camouflaged route, opened in less than 15 days.

The western drive was led by the 304th Division, with the 24th and 66th Regiments, who attacked the 147th Marine Brigade at FSB Nui Ba Ho, FSB Sarge and FSB Holcomb. The Marines' defensive lines crumbled, and together with the tanks of the 397th Armored Battalion the North Vietnamese struck deep, destroying all lines of communication. Within 24 hours PAVN had isolated Fuller. Then the North launched a series of probes and diversionary attacks against the ARVN 1st Division west of Hue, using T-54s and Type 59s of the 4th Armored Battalion. Amid this confusion the ARVN were forced to give ground along the 3rd Division perimeter, and it was only the arrival of the 1st Armored Brigade, and notably the 44 Patton tanks which helped stabilize the situation. On 1 April all outposts along the northern and western perimeters had been evacuated, including FSB Fuller and FSB Khe Gio. Cam Lo Town succumbed under an assault

AC-130E Pave Aegis, serial 96571, of the 16th SOS, Ubon AB, Thailand. It was shot down over Ho Chi Minh Trail on 30 March 1972. The plane was armed with two M61 Vulcan, one 40mm Bofor, and a 'brand new' 105mm howitzer, which was removed from a AC-130E 96570 which had been damaged by ground fire just a few days previously. The plane was never fitted with its rear sensor turret, subsequently installed on other planes of this type between the 40mm and 105mm guns.

T-54B number 391 of the PAVN 203rd Armored Regiment, northwest of Dong Ha, April 1972.

M48A3 Patton of the ARVN 20th Tank Squadron, Dong Ha, April 1972.

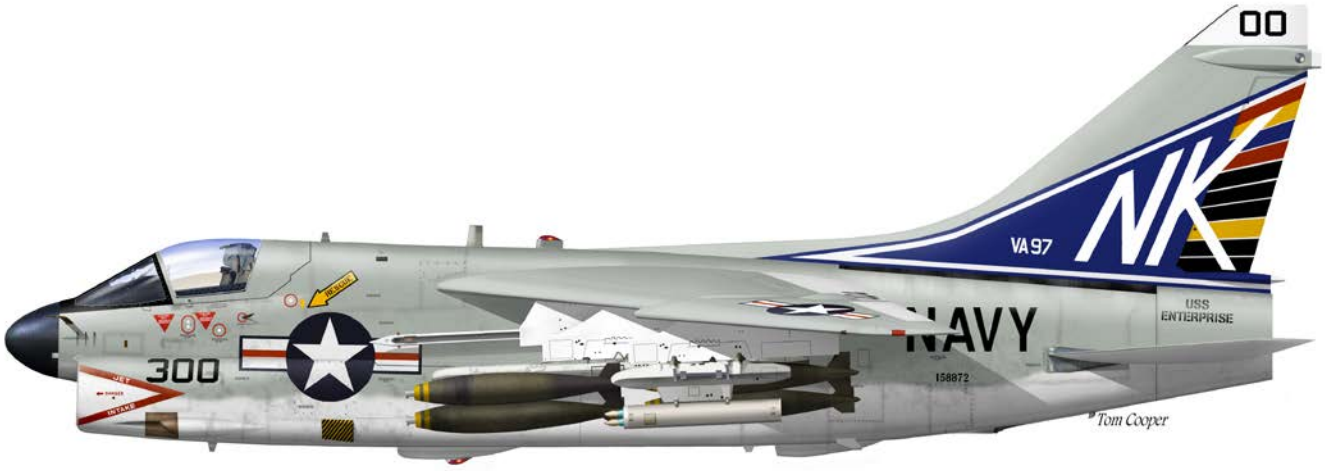
USN F-4J, NG21, VF-92 Silver Kings, of the CVW-9 air-wing on USS *Constellation* during its October 1971–July 1972 deployment off Vietnam. The Phantom was often flown with up to four Sparrows, two Sidewinders, and four Mk.82 GP-bombs, and could be directed for a strike sortie in South Vietnam or a CAP mission in the North as the need arose. Lieutenant Curt Dosé and LCDR James McDevitt flew it over North Vietnam on 10 May 1972, when they shot down a MiG-21.

USN A-4F, NP305, VA-212 from the CVW-21 on USS *Hancock*, during its South East Asia tour from January–October 1972. The aircraft was armed with six Mk.82 GP-bombs on the centreline station.

USN A-7B, VA-56, USS *Midway* (CVA-41), May 1972. That attack squadron had six of its Corsair IIs shot down during its deployment from 21 April 1972 to 23 February 1973 off Vietnam.

Type 63 from the PAVN 66th Battalion of the 202nd Armored Regiment, Ben Hai River, April 1972.

K-63 (YW-531A) from the PAVN 202nd Armored Regiment, Quang Tri, May 1972.



USN A-7E, NK300, from the VA-94; this was the 'CAG aircraft' (plane assigned to the CO of air wing CVW-14), embarked on USS *Enterprise* (CVAN-65) off the Vietnamese coast from September 1972–June 1973. It is shown with six Mk.82 bombs on MER, plus four-round Zuni-launcher 5-inch (127mm) unguided rockets.

F-4D FG 66-7681, 433rd TFS/8th TFW, armed with Mk.82s (three on TER, plus six on MER under the centerline), plus a ALQ-Mk.IIIA jammer pod (a 'three-can' modification of the ALQ-87, which proved most useful against radar-controlled), August 1972.

USMC F-4J, WT19, from VMFA-232, Da Nang in 1972. The plane is shown carrying BLU-27 fire-bombs (napalm) and Sparrow air-to-air missiles.

USMC AH-1J, YW13, from HMH-369. The composite unit, usually operating CH-46Ds, was organized from several Sea Cobras from HMM-165 which retained their unit's markings. The gunship helicopters operated on board the LPD-7 *Cleveland* and LPD-8 *Dubuque* amphibious assault ships, attacking North Vietnamese coastal traffic and anti-aircraft positions ashore with a 20mm gun, 70mm and 127mm unguided rockets.

M41A3 from the ARVN 11th Armored Cavalry Squadron, Quang Tri, September 1972.

K-63 (YW-531A) from the PAVN 202nd Armored Regiment, Quang Tri, August 1972. The APC was captured intact by the South Vietnamese Marines.

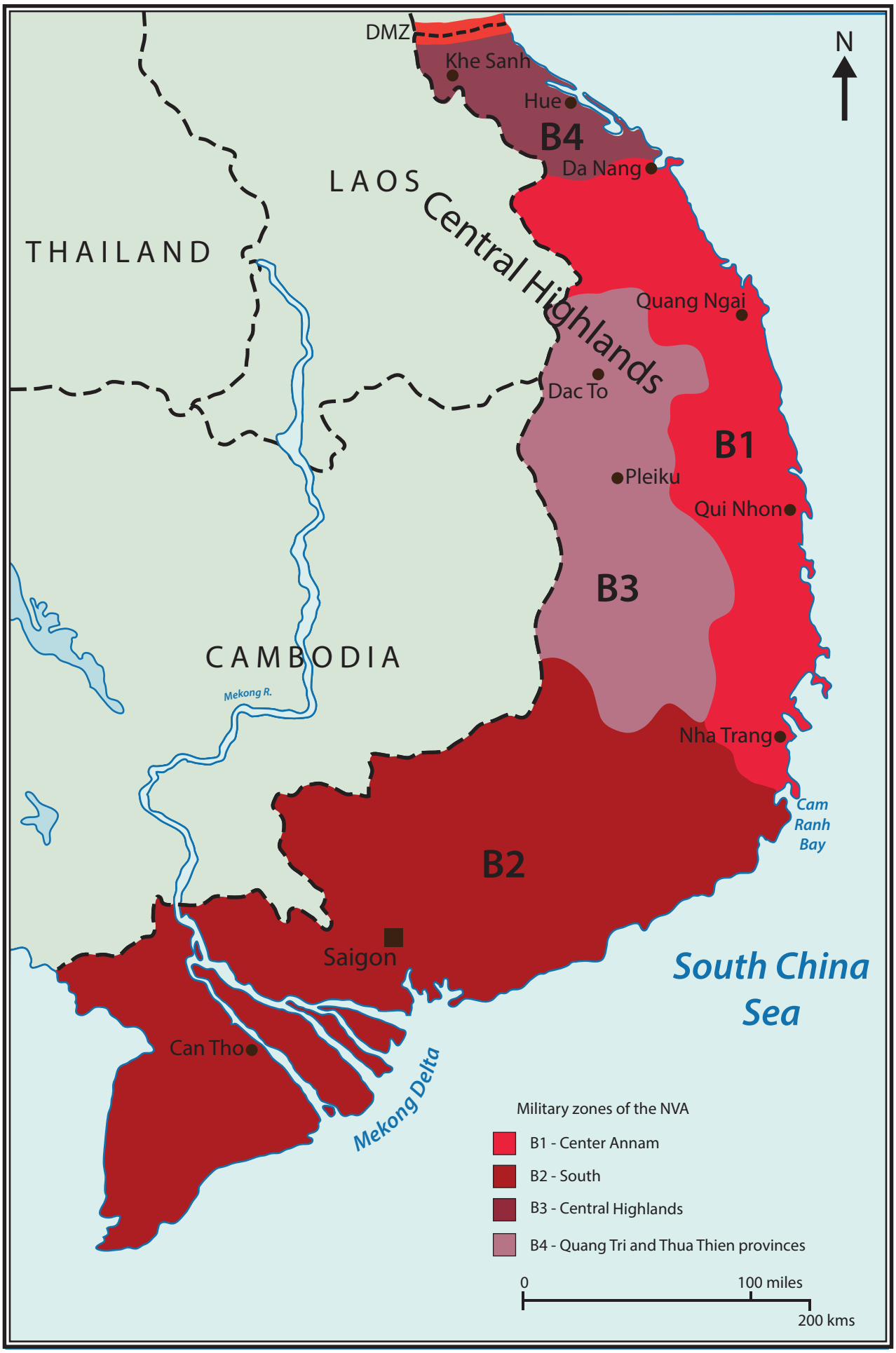
US Army AH-1G 67-15012, F Troop, 4th Cavalry, Hue Phu Bai, August 1972. The gunship helicopter has just been fitted with an infra-red suppression kit as an anti-SA-7 protection measure. It is heavily armed with no less than four M200 rocket launcher pods, each with nineteen 2.75 inch (70mm) unguided rockets.

F-4E, JV 67-0301, from the 469th TFS/388th TFW, equipped with AGM-12C Bullpup command-guided PGMs and SUU-30/A CBUs. The Sparrows were probably left following one of many operations over North Vietnam. The air-to-air missiles were frequently left installed on aircrafts for weeks.

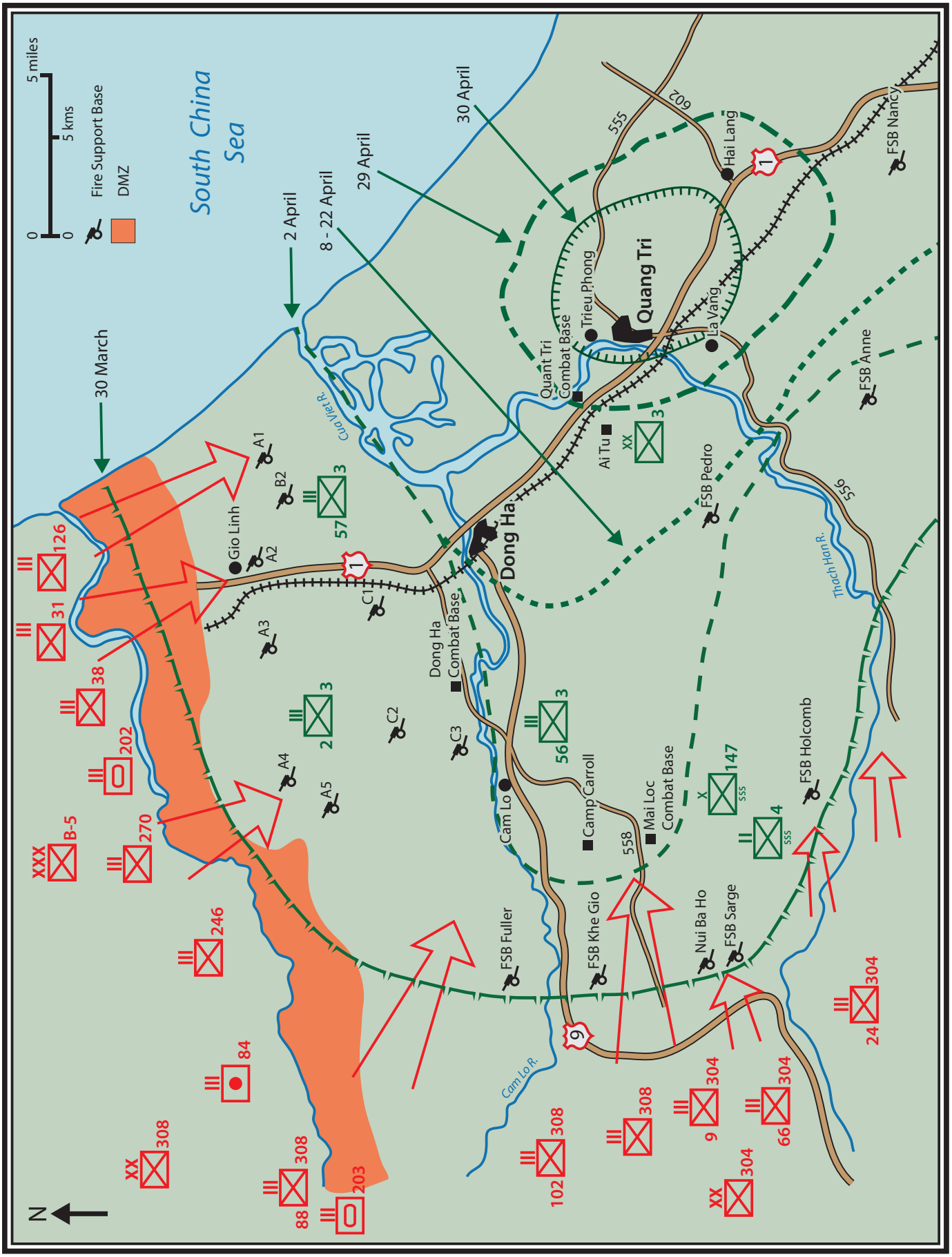
USAF A-7D, JH 71-326, 388th TFW, Korat AB, Thailand March 1973. The aircraft was equipped with SUU-30/B CBUs (5 per MER), plus drop-tank. The unit was based in South East Asia after the Paris Peace Accords as a deterrence force.

Many F-4Es were sent from the US to Thailand as urgent reinforcements. These F-4E, SA 68-262, from 344th TFS, 4th TFW (Seymour Johnson), deployed to Ubon AB between April 1972 and July 1972. These planes were compatible with GBU-10s, which were sometimes used in South Vietnam to destroy artillery pieces and tanks. Laser-guided bombs also breached the thick walls of the Quang Tri Citadel held by the North Vietnamese.

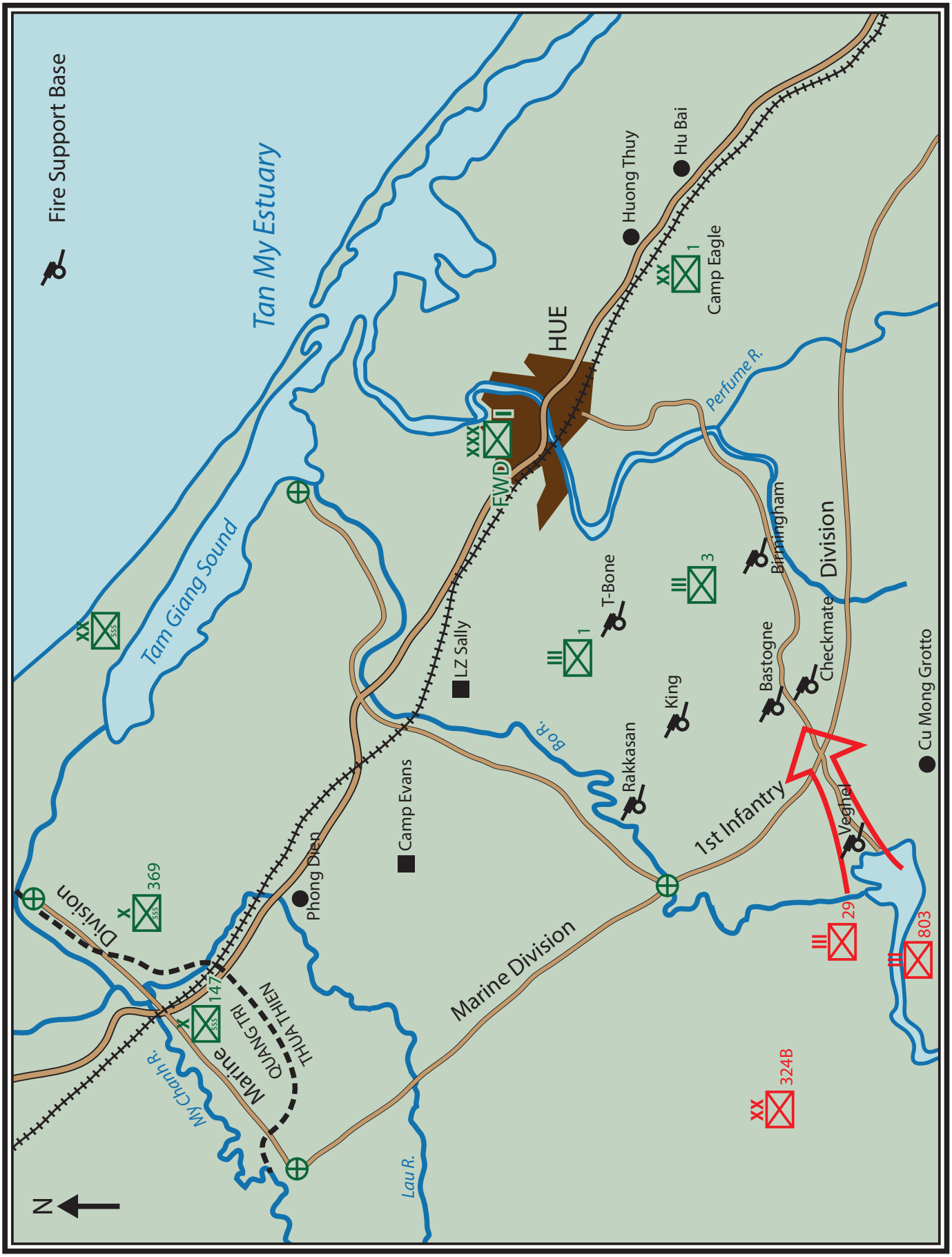
ARVN Tactical Corps



Military Zones of PAVN

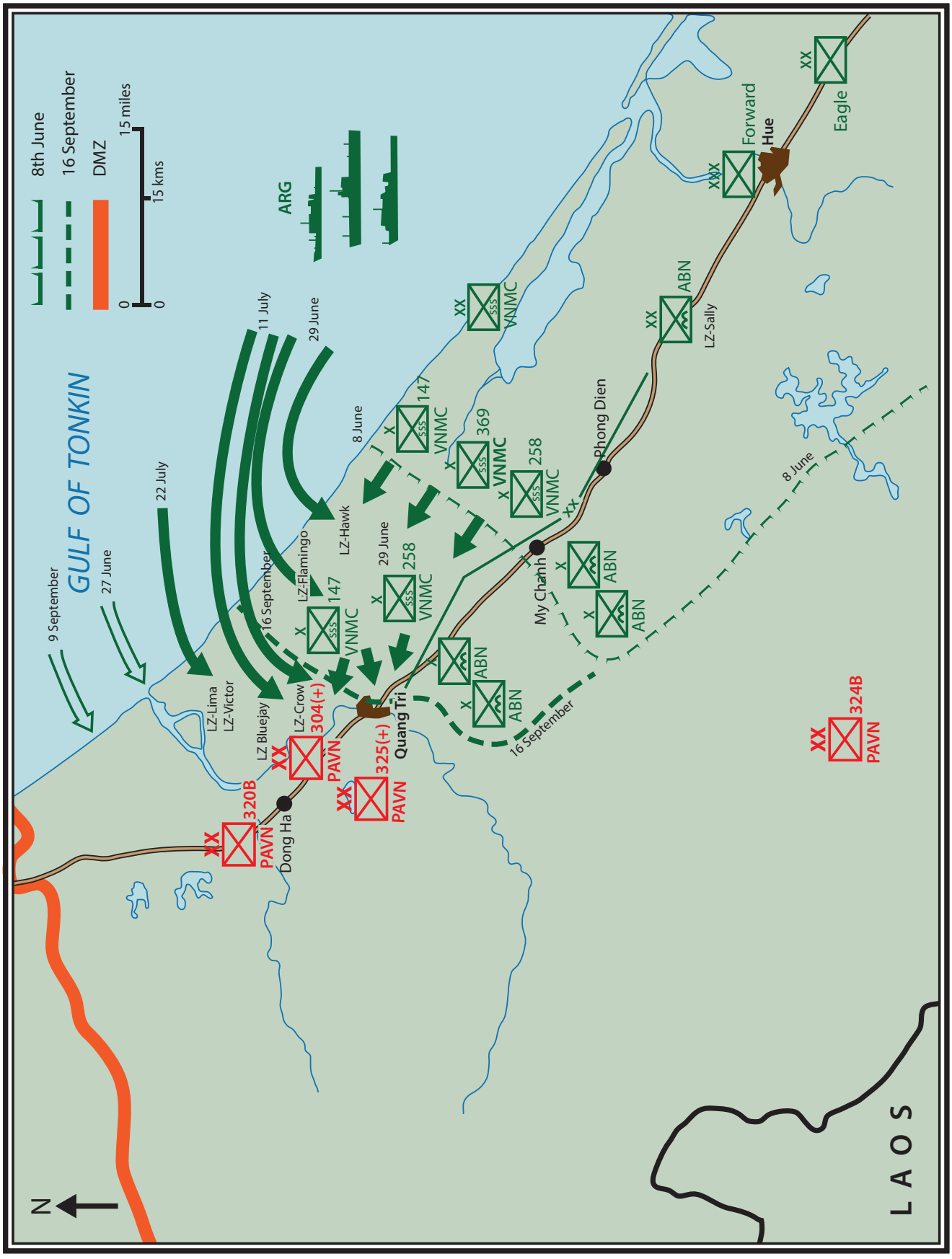


Dong Ha Quang Tri



Defence of Hué

Fire Support Bases



ARVN Counter Offensive

The availability of the USS *Constellation* (CVA-64) when the Easter Offensive started would add a decisive air support for the ARVN helping to blunt the communist offensive. In October 1972 the aircraft carrier experienced race riots onboard, similar to those taking place on the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63). (US Navy)

A stern view of the USS *Coral Sea* (CVA-43) off the coast of Vietnam. The ship inaugurated the aerial mining campaign of the North Vietnamese harbours and waterways on 9 May 1972 by launching 3 A-6As and 6 A-7Es to mine the access channel to Haiphong Harbour. (US Navy)

By 1972, the Corsair II had replaced as ground attack aircraft the Skyhawk on most of the American aircraft carrier. This A-7C of the VA-86 onboard the USS *America* was readied to be catapulted with a hefty load of 12 Mk-82 500lb bombs. (US Navy)

The Skyhawk still served onboard some smaller aircraft carriers of the Essex-class. These A-4Fs from the VA-55, VA-164, and VA-212 were seen on the deck of the USS *Hancock* (CV-19) in April 1972. (US Navy)

The ARVN I Corps was supported by the gunfire provided by the US Navy warships operating offshore. An average of 40 destroyers and cruisers operated on the gun line by the summer of 1972. A typical warship was the USS *Towers* (DDG-9) a Charles F. Adams-class guided missile destroyer. (US Navy)

The warships operating on the gun line were protected from North Vietnamese air or sea attacks by anti-aircraft guided missile destroyers or cruisers like the USS *Sterett* (CG-31), a Belknap-class frigate. On 19 April 1972 she shot down a MiG-17 with a Terrier SAM off the coast of Dong Hoi, north of Haiphong. However, the destroyer USS *Higbee* (DD-806), a Gearing-class destroyer, was damaged by a 250kg bomb. (US Navy)

The VNMC 3rd Battalion defending the city of Dong Ha repulsed several North Vietnamese assaults. However, it was forced to blow up the bridge that spanned the Mieu Giang River, with the help of USMC advisor Captain John Ripley, on 2 April 1972. (ARVN)

by the 320th Division which knocked out a cavalry troop. Alarmingly, over the first three days of the offensive the North Vietnamese were only attacked by sporadic air strikes due to bad weather. Only the convoys moving along the coastal road were subjected to naval bombardment carried out by US Navy destroyers, thus the three engineer regiments attached to the Tri-Thien Theater made tremendous progress and sent forward some 214 tanks and APCs; 186 tracked artillery tractors; as well as 100 armored cars; anti-aircraft self-propelled vehicles; and engineering vehicles. Some 4,500 trucks with 200 guns and 10 SAM-2 transporters had already crossed the DMZ.

Both President Thieu and General Abrams did not fully grasp the seriousness of the situation due to a lack of ground-intel and breakdown of communication with forward units. They believed this was only a diversionary offensive and that the main attack would center on the central Highlands. It was finally decided to reinforce the I Corps with elements from the central reserve, and with this the whole Marine Division – with the remaining 369th Brigade, the Division Headquarters and the supporting units, redeployed from Saigon to Hue. The 4th and 5th Ranger Groups, from the IV and the III Corps, were also flown in. The 18th Cavalry Squadron were assigned to the I Corps to secure the supply routes from the Quang Tri Bridge on Route 1, south to La Vang Thuong. The VNAF Skyraider wing, at Bien Hoa, dispatched a strong detachment at Da Nang to reinforce the local A-37 wing. The I Corps requested a counter-offensive to retake the lost positions but President Thieu ordered a pull-back to wait for American fighters. This withdrawal took place in a relatively orderly fashion and both the RF battalions and the 57th, 2nd, and 56th Regiments fell back south behind the Cua Viet, Mieu Giang and Cam Lo rivers.

By now on the western perimeter, the 147th Marine Brigade was also forced to fall back towards FSB Mai Loc and FSB Pedro. However, the key to this sector's defense was FSB Camp Carroll, which was the most important South Vietnamese artillery position, south of the DMZ. The base was defended by a battalion of the 56th Regiment and four M42 anti-aircraft tanks, but on 2 April after a third heavy attack it was obvious the situation was deteriorating rapidly – with many of its guns outranged by communist artillery. Lieutenant Colonel Dinh contacted the enemy and negotiated a surrender. He informed his US senior advisor Lieutenant Colonel Bill Camper, who along with Major Joe Brown refused to admit defeat. They began burning classified documents and tried escaping through the perimeter-fence but were forced back under enemy fire. Before the PAVN broke through both men and about 30 ARVN soldiers were rescued by a CH-47 helicopter that was damaged in the rescue attempt.

By the end of the afternoon, approximately 1,800 Camp Carroll soldiers surrendered en masse. The North Vietnamese immediately moved in and towed away 22 guns, including the prized M107s. The base was then destroyed by a B-52 strike. Losing Camp Carroll was a disaster for the Americans, and made the defense of Mai Loc extremely precarious, forcing the 147th Marine Brigade to fall back to Quang Tri. The unit was then directed towards Hue for rest and refitting and was subsequently replaced by the 369th Marine Brigade, which quickly set up new defensive positions at FSB Nancy.

The race for the Dong Ha Bridge

For three days the ARVN I Corps hesitated in dropping this bridge crossing the Mieu Giang River because there were still many ARVN troops scattered beyond it, whilst thousands of refugees continued

Pattons of the ARVN 20th Tank Squadron in the area of Dong Ha. (ARVN)

These North Vietnamese T-54s had been knocked-out by the ARVN Pattons of the 20th Tank Squadron whilst attacking Dong Ha along Route 1. (ARVN)

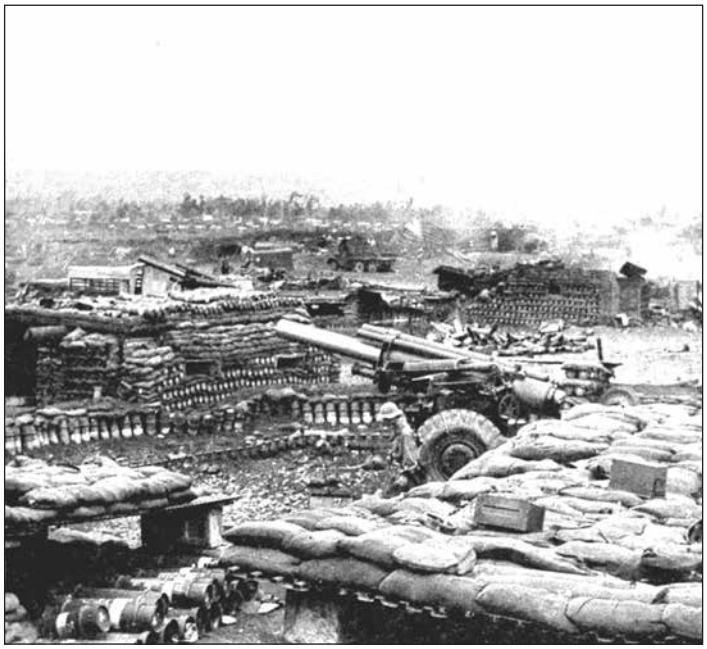
to flow in south over it. However, they also understood its strategic importance to the North Vietnamese – if they captured it the PAVN would then have a direct route towards Quang Tri and Hue, which would have dire consequences. The North Vietnamese knew this too well, and thus on 2 April the Tri-Thien Theater commanders ordered its capture.

The 512th Armored Battalion, along with the 7th Armored Company, rumbled to its goal, capturing the C1 FSB as well as the village of Quan Ngang on their way. The whole battalion of T-54s then regrouped with the 66th Armored Battalion on Type 63 tanks and K-63 APCs, pushing for the bridge in conjunction with the 48th Infantry Regiment. However, the assault of the 308th Division against Dong Ha, held by the VNMC 3rd Battalion, was stopped short when it tried to outflank the ARVN's defenses from the east. The vanguard column was attacked by VNAF Skyraiders and the South Vietnamese pilots reported that some 11 tanks had been immobilized. Furthermore, some 44 M48 tanks from the ARVN 20th Tank Squadron had just reached the city as reinforcement.

The Pattons themselves then rushed towards the bridge accompanied by four M151 Jeeps armed with recoilless 106mm anti-tank guns. The South Vietnamese tanks carefully took their marks and opened fire on the approaching enemy in a long-range shooting campaign of around 3,000 meters. Radio monitoring soon showed that

As soon as Camp Carroll surrendered, the North Vietnamese troops rushed in to occupy the place capturing this M107 self-propelled gun. The inscription in Vietnamese on the barrel reads 'King of the battlefield.' (PAVN)

On 2 April 1972, Colonel Pham Van Dinh, the commander of Camp Carroll, South Vietnam's most important artillery base south of the DMZ, surrendered the strategic position. Considered an ARVN hero, this defection came as a shock to the whole South Vietnamese armed forces. It was the most high-profile and unique surrender in the entire conflict. (PAVN)



A North Vietnamese soldier inspects a battery of 155mm howitzers abandoned intact at Camp Carroll. (PAVN)

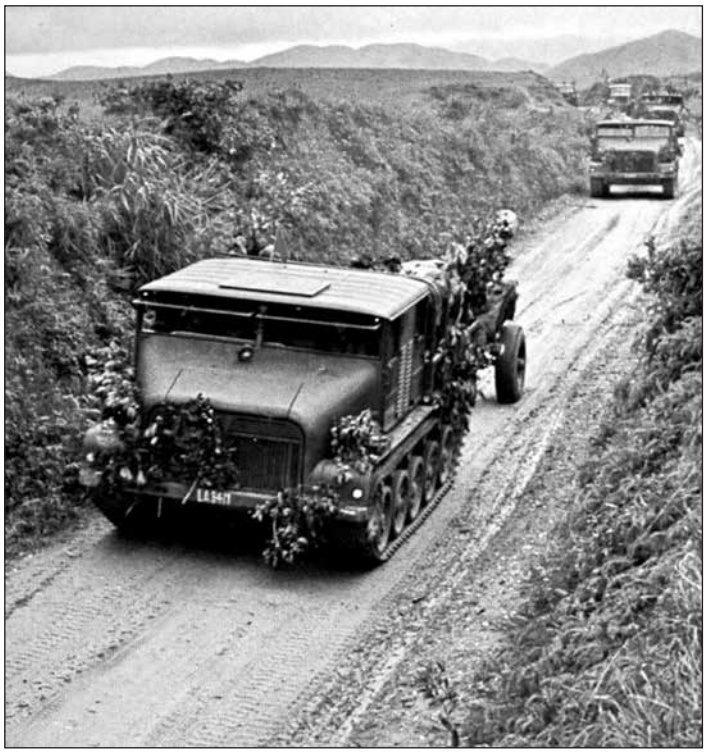
These North Vietnamese soldiers climb over a captured M42 anti-aircraft tank found abandoned at Camp Carroll. It was one of four such vehicles charged with base perimeter defense. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese also captured four M55 50 Cal quad machine guns. They were mounted on M54 trucks and were used for the Camp Carroll perimeter defense. (PAVN)

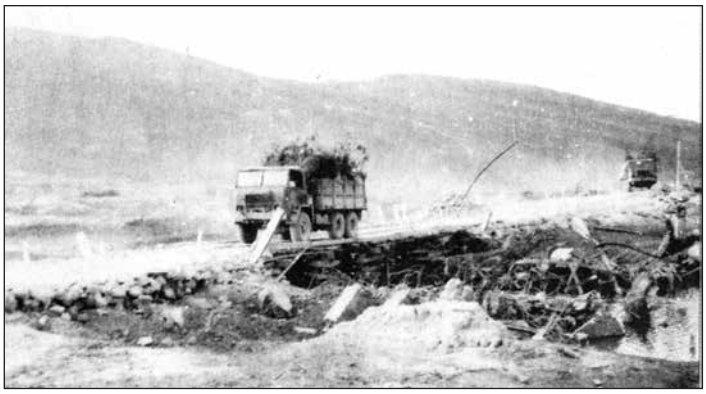
The North Vietnamese carried away some 20 artillery guns captured at Camp Carroll. This Soviet ATS-59 tracked artillery tractor tows away an M114 155mm howitzer. (PAVN)

On 3 April 1972, after being stopped at the Dong Ha Bridge, the PAVN 308th Division found another crossing at Cam Lo. The loss of the town enabled the link-up with the 304th Division attacking further west along the DMZ. (PAVN)

A troop of M41 from the ARVN 11th ACS was lost at Cam Lo whilst it supported a battalion of the 2nd Regiment of the South Vietnamese 3rd Division. (PAVN)



Simultaneous to the offensive carried out against the eastern sector of the DMZ by the 308th Division, the 304th Division pushed through the DMZ further west – enveloping the ARVN front left flank. This artillery unit, equipped with D-74 122mm guns, attached to the division, heads south. The tracked artillery tractors were Polish-built Mazur D-350. (PAVN)



Troops of PAVN 304th Division drive over a bridge in the DMZ just put in place by the engineering units. The trucks were Polish-built Star 66 with 4.5 tons of load-carrying capacity. (PAVN)

For the first time since the beginning of the war, the North Vietnamese introduced the SAM-2 inside South Vietnam in April 1972. Two regiments were deployed to protect the forces of the Tri-Thien Theater. (PAVN)

This battery of S-60 57mm AA guns is moving across the border. The guns are towed by Soviet-built AT-L tracked artillery tractors. (PAVN)

the North Vietnamese tanks were in a state of chaos and, being unable to see who had hit them, they retaliated with heavy shelling towards Dong Ha City, forcing the ARVN tanks to pull back. A company of combat engineers was rushed to place explosives on the Dong Ha Bridge and ordered to drop it when the North Vietnamese tanks got close. As the PAVN 2nd Motorized Battalion tried crossing the Mieu Giang River in a further assault, the entire regiment was struck by naval shelling. Four out of eight Type 63 tanks were destroyed whilst trying to cross and a VNAF air strike disabled eight additional APCs.

As things deteriorated, the 20th Tank Squadron Commander asked Commander Brigadier General Giai to make a decision about

North Vietnamese forces had a hard time when roads were waterlogged. These troops were mobilized to retrieve this T-54 tank from the 203rd Regiment caught in the mud. (PAVN)

These ARVN tanks anxiously wait in the Quang Tri perimeter for the next North Vietnamese tank assault. Their M41 light tanks were clearly outmatched by the enemy T-54s even if their AP-T 76mm rounds could deal with them at close ranges. (ARVN)

dropping the Dong Ha Bridge – he finally gave the order to do it. Captain Ripley and Major Smock reportedly helped ARVN combat engineers place explosives on critical points along it, so the bridge was impassable when detonated. The bridge was dropped at around 1600 but the North Vietnamese then quickly tried to find another crossing further west at Cam Lo on Route 9. This town, held by a battalion of the 2nd Regiment, was now left dangerously isolated following the withdrawal of Marines from FSB Mai Loc; thus, the 308th Division redirected their tanks from the 203rd Armored Regiment. However, the Cam Lo Bridge was eventually taken on 3 April in a one-sided battle where the T-54s destroyed many ARVN tanks.

With this, despite the massive blow to morale following the loss of Camp Carroll, the new defensive lines were vital. Even if poor weather was still hampering air support, the rapid increase in US air units authorized by President Nixon began to make their presence felt, as did the efficient US Navy gunfire. Nevertheless, a new event temporarily diverted the much-needed close air support of the 3rd Division when an EB-66 electronic warfare aircraft was brought down by a SAM-2 on 2 April, north of the Cam Lo River. Only the navigator Lieutenant Colonel Hambleton managed to bail out, and for the next 12 days he was the subject of a massive air and ground rescue effort. A

Only the Pattons of the 20th Tank Squadron of the I Armored Brigade could match the PAVN T-54s and Type 59s. (USAF)

This Type 59 was captured intact by the South Vietnamese at Vinh Phuoc on 10 April 1972. (US Army)

This T-54 from the 512th Armored Battalion supported an attack of the 308th Division against the western sector of the Quang Tri perimeter on 9 April. It was among the several dozen destroyed by the ARVN Pattons. (US Army)

By early April 1972, the South Vietnamese had launched several counter-attacks in order to expand their defensive perimeter around Dong Ha-Quang Tri sector. Troops of the 3rd Division ride atop an M113 of the 11 Armored Cavalry Squadron. (US Army)

great number of sorties flown in the area northwest of Dong Ha were then assigned to the task instead of supporting the South Vietnamese hard-pressed positions. Hambleton had top secret access to Strategic Air Command operations and was an expert in SAM countermeasures – no less than five additional aircraft were shot down during rescue attempts but Hambleton was finally extracted behind enemy lines in a joint SEAL Commandos effort.

Fortunately for the South, after a full week of fighting the North Vietnamese were forced to temporarily suspend their offensive to regroup and replenish forces. North Vietnamese planning had estimated that it would take at least 20 days to quash and push the ARVN back from its outlying defensive positions – in fact, this first defensive ring had been conquered in only a week. The PAVN commanders were left shocked and did not react quickly enough to exploit this missed opportunity – the chain of command was still too rigid – leaving no room for initiative at ground level. The inexperienced logistical planners also had many difficulties in coping with new scenarios as they arose, and there were numerous delays in replenishing the units on the front. In the meantime, reinforcements arrived for the ARVN I Corps and all forces around Quang Tri were now placed under the control of the 3rd Division, including two infantry regiments, two marine brigades, one armored brigade, four Ranger Groups and all Territorial Forces of the Quang Tri Province. This totaled over 23 battalions but despite this growing control, the 3rd Division staff never received additional support in logistic and signal

Tanks of the 20th Tank Squadron rest inside the Quang Tri enclave. The unit played a pivotal role in the early fighting, claiming over 80 enemy tanks. (US Army)

communication equipment, essential to the command of troops. American advisors also pointed out that Commander Brigadier General Giai was under too much pressure. They argued that the Marines and the Rangers be placed directly under Corps control, in separate responsibility sectors, but General Lam brushed aside their recommendations, perhaps sensing that he himself was not up to

Simultaneous to the offensive across the DMZ, the North Vietnamese also attacked the ARVN in the west and southwest sectors of Hue from Laos. The PAVN 324B Division moved into its attack positions on Chinese CA-30 and Soviet GAZ-63 trucks. (PAVN)

The PAVN 324B Division launched a series of diversionary attacks throughout April and May 1972 against the ARVN 1st Division west of Hue. They were supported by the T-54s and T-34-85s of the 4th Armored Battalion. (PAVN)

These ZSU-57-2s belong to the 19th Anti-Aircraft Company operating in the Quang Tri area. The propaganda slogans on the turret mean: 'For the Fatherland' and 'For the Independence and Freedom'. (PAVN)

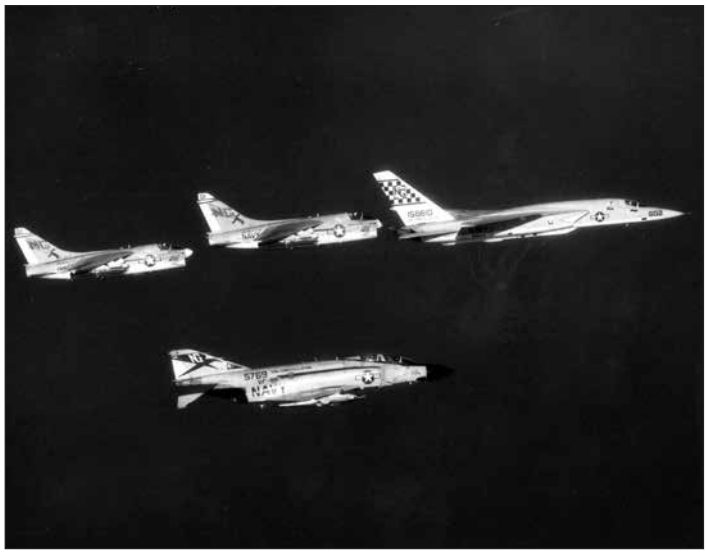
the job of directing the battle. Instead, he decided to delegate most powers to Commander Brigadier General Giai but did not give him the means to handle such an important task. Without clear command lines, Commander Brigadier General Giai frequently found that the orders he gave meant nothing until double-checked, and General Lam himself continued to intervene directly.

K-63s of the 66th Armored Battalions support an attack along the eastern sector of Quang Tri. Throughout the campaign, the PAVN lacked mechanized infantry and APCs. (PAVN)

This Type 59 of the PAVN 4th Armored Battalion of the 203rd Armored Regiment was captured in the sector of the ARVN 1st Division. It was driving back to Hue escorted by a V100 armored car. (US Army)

The VNAF 1st Air Division at Da Nang provided excellent close-air support for the ARVN fighting around Quang Tri and Hue. These two A-37Bs from the 516th Fighter Squadron of the 61st Tactical Wing are departing for another sortie. (USAF)

The North Vietnamese resumed their offensive on 9 April from north and west, with the aim of hitting South Vietnam's new defensive system, based on three centers of resistance from north to south around Dong Ha, Ai Tu and La Vang-Quang Tri. Two coordinated assaults tried to breach the western perimeter, with the first carried out by the 308th Division, supported by the 512th Armored Battalion, against Dong Ha. After an artillery barrage, the attack started from two axes. The 36th Regiment attacked along Route 9 with the 7th Armored Company with 12 T-54s, whilst the 102nd Regiment attacked



By waiting for the redeployment of the USAF units to South East Asia, it was the US Navy carriers that undertook most of the first missions. These four aircraft – two A-7Es from the VA-147, one F-4J from the VF-96, and one RA-5C – from the RVAH-11 of the USS *Constellation* are heading towards the Vietnamese coast for a new mission in May 1972. (US Navy)

The ARVN Commander Brigadier General Vu Van Giai, a competent and courageous officer, served as scapegoat when Quang Tri fell and was court-martialled and imprisoned. At the fall of Saigon in 1975, the North Vietnamese took him from his cell and sent him to a 're-education' camp. (US Army)

The North Vietnamese deployed no less than two anti-aircraft artillery divisions in support of their offensive across the DMZ – a 37mm AA gun in action in the Quang Tri area. (PAVN)

The Pattons of the 20th Tank Squadron were sent to deal with any breaching of the Quang Tri defensive perimeter. The crews were consistently better at long-range shooting than their North Vietnamese opponents. (ARVN)

Hill 52 (FSB Phuong Hoang), trying to take the Vinh Phuoc Bridge in order to cut the road to Quang Tri. The regiment was supported by the 6th Armored Company with 18 T-54s and Type 59s and the 19th Anti-Aircraft Company with 12 ZSU-57-2s. Infantry support was poor and thus the North Vietnamese had not detected the Patton positions which immediately engaged at a distance of 2,800 meters. The returning fire was imprecise and 16 T-54s were destroyed and one Type 59 captured.

However, the 6th Armored Company fared better and played a big part in the fall of FSB Phuon Hoang, but while the tanks were assembled to move to its next objective, the Vinh Phuoc Bridge, the ARVN had reacted and sent in a task force of Marines and Pattons. The North Vietnamese tanks quickly dispersed and tried to withdraw under heavy shelling and a confused close-range tank fight ensued where the ARVN tanks prevailed. ARVN artillery fire was now improving and well laid – channelling enemy tanks into a minefield where five T-54s were lost. An ARVN column of 8 M48s and 12 M113s then struck and with the help of air support, destroyed the PAVN armored unit. Field

Even if the US Army ground forces had all been evacuated, its helicopter units continued to provide key support to the ARVN. An AH-1G and an UH-1H touch down for refuelling and rearming on an ARVN position near Dong Ha. (US Army)

By the end of April 1972, with conflicting orders and great disorganization, the pull-out of Quang Tri turned into a rout. These ARVN soldiers try to catch one of the last trucks breaking out while enemy rockets rain in. (US Army)

'The Horror Highway', as the portion of Route 1 between the Ben Da and Truong Phuoc bridges was christened by the press. The North Vietnamese artillery shelled all traffic-jammed vehicles, irrespective of whether they were military or civilians. (US Army)

A dejected and wounded ARVN soldier wanders along Route 1, trying to catch up with infantry from Quang Tri. He passes a damaged and abandoned M35 truck with a M55 50 Cal. Quad machine gun as well as a CJ-3 Jeep. (US Army)

directives were then hastily issued to North Vietnamese division and armor commanders. With this, the tanks were held back to exploit any breach in the enemy frontline and enemy tanks were only engaged at close range, and supported by 'tank-killer' teams equipped with RPGs,

Only a fraction of the ARVN forces of the Dong Ha-Quang Tri enclave safely reached the ARVN's new frontline established just north of Hue, along the My Chanh River. Less than a troop of M41 tanks succeeded in breaking through. (US Army)

Only the South Vietnamese Marines fought cohesively out of the Quang Tri cauldron, even if they could not safeguard their heavy equipment and vehicles. The disciplined Marines tried instead to bring back as many infantry weapons as possible. (ARVN)

recoilless guns and the Malyutka 9M14. The 2nd, 6th, and 15th Missile Anti-Tank Companies raced from their North Vietnam locations to the Dong Ha Front.

However, with the improving weather air support also increased, but unrealistically General Lam now wanted to launch an all-out counter-offensive called Operation Quang Trung 729 to reoccupy the lost fire support bases. He even envisaged crossing the DMZ and grabbing a stretch of land in order to force the North Vietnamese into withdrawing to protect their homeland. Commander Brigadier General Giai vehemently opposed this scheme, arguing that his positions were still extremely precarious and heavily targeted by long-range enemy artillery, arguing it would be better to reorganize the defenses of Quang Tri, but Lam, who had never visited the frontlines and did not have a clear picture of the battlefield, upheld his own decision and US advisors could only influence his plans by redirecting the effort towards the western perimeter. The counter-attack was officially launched on 14 April with the aim of retaking the FSB Holcomb, Mai Loc and Camp Carroll. Participating units consisted

North Vietnamese troops entered Quang Tri City on 2 May 1972 and passed an abandoned M35 and a Toyota DW 15L 2.5-ton trucks. Over 10,000 South Vietnamese troops had been killed or wounded and over 5,000 taken prisoner. (PAVN)

The PAVN captured a huge booty inside the Quang Tri enclave which included this Caterpillar D8 bulldozer abandoned on its trailer, towed by an M818 tractor truck. (PAVN)

The ARVN 1st Armored Brigade was nearly wiped out at the fall of Quang Tri. These North Vietnamese troops inspect their 'winnings', including several abandoned M41 and M48 tanks. (PAVN)

of combat elements spread across the west – the 57th Regiment; the 1st Armored Brigade, with the 4th and 5th Ranger Groups attached with the 147th Marine Brigade; the 2nd Regiment; and the 1st Ranger Group. Right from the off the ARVN probes were stopped short by heavy enemy artillery and even though a little terrain was recaptured, no unit was able to get further than 1km from their departure line. The counter-offensive stalled and deteriorated into a bloody duel leading to ARVN units being reshuffled. To make things worse, in the middle of the ARVN logistical build-up to the counter-attack, the North Vietnamese pre-empted their move and launched a third probe on the western perimeter on 18 April, with elements of 304th Division who targeted the sector held by the 147th Marine Brigade.

On 23 April the North Vietnamese launched another series of attacks in order to attract the attention of the ARVN 57th Regiment around Dong Ha. The armored reinforcements rushed to the scene but were ambushed by infiltration teams equipped with the AT-3 wire-guided anti-tank missiles, which destroyed three M-48s and several M-113s. Throughout that week, the North Vietnamese continuously pounded the ARVN positions of Ai Tu and Quang Tri, where on 21 April, they destroyed the munitions dump. All the stored ammunition, as well as the gasoline, burned along with half of the stored rice and a great deal of signal equipment, and all the vital batteries were lost too. Despite sporadic ARVN offensive sweeps, Operation Quang Trung 729 screamed to a halt on 24 April. During this time growing PAVN pressure led to massive wins on the battlefield, and on 25 April the ARVN lost eighteen 155mm and forty-seven 105mm howitzers. More than 37 M41 and M48 tanks, 89 M-113s and 240 vehicles were also lost due to insufficient and inadequate supply, deficiency in intelligence and tardy deployment of the reserves, but it was the leadership that was the most lacking, with sloppy coordination and a difficult command system that was complex and beyond the grasp of Commander Brigadier General Giai.

The fall of Quang Tri

The exposed town and base of Quang Tri was on the verge of being lost and for several days Commander Brigadier General Giai had planned to evacuate the area by moving his forces south of the Thach Hanh River but, acting cautiously, he kept his plans to himself, fearing that if his subordinates learnt of his intentions, they would wreck the element of surprise. He also deliberately withheld his tactical plan from the I Corps Commander, which in turn alienated him still further from General Lam. This distrust added a further dimension to the events leading to the fall of Quang Tri.

The North Vietnamese in the meantime had planned their own offensive in order to break the stalemate. This encompassed a coordinated push by the 304th and 308th Divisions with two regiments from the B5 Front against the sector of Dong Ha-Quang Tri. The battlefield was isolated by cutting Route 1 south of Quang Tri with elements of the 324B Division, supported by a tank company from the 203rd Armored Regiment. Then at 0700 on 27 April, they attacked the northern sector supported by the 397th Armored Battalion, as well as an additional Type 63 amphibious tank company. They penetrated the area between Dong Ha and Quang Tri, with orders to take the Ai Tu base. The fighting then spread to the entire western perimeter, with many communist operations probing weak points in the ARVN defense lines. The tank crews received strict orders to wait until each of the attack axes had been surrounded and the initial breaching of the enemy positions made by the infantry. However, each tank received additional anti-armor shells in case of prolonged fighting and the 4th Ranger Group and the 2nd Regiment bore the brunt of the initial assaults northwest of Dong Ha. The Rangers were now under direct tank fire from two adjacent hills where the North Vietnamese had dug in several T-54s. The communists now advanced cautiously, each assault being led by sappers that breached the barbed wire with Bangalore torpedoes. The PAVN 88th Regiment then rushed through a breach just behind a rolling artillery barrage in the Dai Ang area. It was supported by 12 T-54s of the 7th Armored Company that helped to take Hill 35; then the advance was led by the 'exploitation group', consisting of 16 T-54s of the 6th Armored Company under Captain

A North Vietnamese soldier looks over an abandoned M548 cargo carrier from the ARVN 11th ACS that was attached to the 3rd Division. (PAVN)

These North Vietnamese tankers look over an abandonned M41A3 on the shoreline east of Quang Tri. (PAVN)

Nguyen Van Thai, but their advance was blocked by a Ranger counter-attack supported by 15 M41 tanks.

In the meantime, the commander tank of 6th Armored Company had been hit and immobilized but it continued to use its 100mm gun to cover the advance of the other tanks. Tank number 986, positioned on Hill 37, surprised two Pattons and destroyed them as they tried to outflank the North Vietnamese positions, and the 1st Armored Company was deployed to help the 101st Regiment take Hill 32, where the T-54s destroyed two M41s. At 1100 Hill 26 was then taken, forcing the South Vietnamese to also evacuate Hill 28, held by a Ranger battalion and 11 M41s. The retreating column was then ambushed by the T-54s of the 7th Armored Company that had destroyed three M41s and captured five others. Once more, the ARVN did not give up and mounted another counter-attack but they themselves were ambushed and repeatedly hit by anti-tank teams equipped with AT-3 Sagger Missiles, which disabled three Pattons as well as several M41s and M113s. By the end of the afternoon, a new breach was opened on the defensive perimeter of the 4th Ranger Group by the PAVN 36th Regiment. Through this breach poured the 88th and 102nd Regiments and, despite the T-54 support, they encountered strong resistance on the fortified Hills of 24 and 32 throughout the evening; then finally, the 2nd Battalion and 2nd ARVN Regiment were also overrun along the north bank of the Thach Han River.

Panic then further erupted when the commander of the 1st Armored Brigade ordered the 20th Tank Squadron to leave their positions to clear a communist roadblock on Route 1 – seeing the tanks leave, troops began to flee. Commander Brigadier General Giai was so alarmed by these developments, he personally took charge of the situation and averted a massive catastrophe. However, there was now no way to push all the units back to their abandoned positions and so they regrouped west of Quang Tri City to set up a new defense line north of the Thach Hanh River. Using this confusion to their advantage, the North Vietnamese and the 308th Division, with the regrouped 512th Armored Battalion, lurched forward. The T-54s of the 3rd and 6th Armored Companies now took over the lead with infantry mounted directly on the tanks in a race to take the Vinh Phuoc Bridge intact. En route, they knocked out four M113s and one 105mm howitzer. That night though, they decided to stop 2km short of the bridge, preferring to wait for morning and the infantry to resume their advance. Thus when it did resume, the North Vietnamese were ready with a combined force of the 3rd, 6th and 7th Companies of the 512th Armored Battalion and a major tank battle quickly raged, with the North Vietnamese trying to destroy an ARVN Task Force made up of around 30 tanks. The South Vietnamese also received excellent air support that blocked all the PAVN assaults that morning. Some 15 additional T-54s were destroyed by both the Pattons and the fighter-bombers and it seemed that the South Vietnamese had finally prevailed, but then the PAVN sent reinforcements and pounded the ARVN with long-range 130mm guns.

On 28 April, the North Vietnamese moved in for their final assault on the now encircled Quang Tri – and panicked civilians began to stream south along Route 1 which was hit indiscriminately, killing thousands of innocent people along the 'Terror Boulevard'. They continued to advance with tanks to tighten the ring around the city, and the PAVN then engaged the 304th Division on the western flank at Ai Tu on the northwest of Quang Tri, and along the Thach Han River that separated Ai Tu from Quang Tri. The 308th Division attacked due south against Dong Ha, and the coastal sector was taken by regiments of the B5 Front and the 324B Division, closing the escape door in the south. It wasn't until the following day that a break in the ARVN defensive lines was made, when 12 T-54s succeeded to pass through a mined area between two enemy positions. The leading tank of Sergeant Nguyen Van Hao carefully followed the pathway left by the South Vietnamese tanks, opening the way for the rest of the tanks without losing a single one. Yet, it would take another two more days of intense fighting, reinforced by the tanks of the 3rd Armored Company, to overcome the last pockets of ARVN resistance.

Along the Thach Han River, the 9th Regiment, supported by the T54s of the 5th Armored Company, was more successful and took the bridge that spanned Route 1. The North Vietnamese dug in, and during three days pushed back several ARVN armor-led counter-attacks. Under considerable pressure from the 308th Division, the already depleted 57th Regiment evacuated Dong Ha, leaving a troop of the 20th Tank Squadron (down to 18 M-48s) as the sole force north of Route 1, along with a few rangers from the 5th Group. Dong Ha was eventually lost on the evening of 28 April and the South Vietnamese were exhausted, with fuel and ammunition stocks dwindling at an accelerating rate. The North Vietnamese anti-aircraft units had now ringed the whole of Ai Tu-Quang Tri and made any helicopter mission a risky undertaking. The encircled position was hit by over 21,000 artillery shells in three days, but the cost was also very heavy for the North Vietnamese who had lost some 33 tanks during the battle.

Brigadier General Giai declared a 'tactical emergency' and received priority B-52 air strikes. Over the next two days the South Vietnamese began blowing up their howitzers when they ran out of ammunition. With the escalating losses Giai then decided to pull out of Quang Tri completely, but before doing so ordered the 147th Marines to pull back from Ai Tu and join them in holding the town long enough

for the infantry and Rangers to withdraw south and establish a new defensive line across the Thach Hanh River. The withdrawal was going as planned until the Marines discovered that the ARVN engineers had already blown up the two bridges crossing the river. The Marines thus tried to tow their 105mm howitzers across fords, but strong currents hampered their efforts, forcing them to destroy 18 guns and 22 trucks. Soldiers were subsequently forced to swim across the river and the Marines became the last effective combat force within the Quang Tri perimeter, stoically holding their positions under continuous artillery barrage.

In the meantime, an armored task force was merged with the 369th Marine Brigade for the pressing task of reopening Route 1 from Hue. Fire support for the pull-out was provided by the US Navy which deployed off-coast with 12 destroyers, three cruisers and a heavy cruiser. Informed of Commander Brigadier General Gia's intentions, General Lam tacitly concurred, although he never confirmed his approval nor did he give any directives to the 3rd Division's commander. Thus, on 1 May when the withdrawal began, General Lam counter-ordered and demanded that all units remain in place and hold their positions at all costs. General Lam's last-minute dash command turned out to be an order of President Thieu which he had just received from Saigon. The Paris peace talks had just resumed and the South Vietnamese had secured a strong negotiation package – but the conflicting orders invariably resulted in chaos with many soldiers refusing, or unable, to return to their already lost positions. In the sector held by the 17th Cavalry Squadron, the contradictory orders resulted in the destruction of all remaining equipment. Within four hours, the ARVN defense of Quang Tri had crumbled completely and soldiers now joined an endless stream of civilians fleeing along Route 1 which was pounded mercilessly by the North Vietnamese. At least 500 military trucks and countless civilian vehicles were destroyed and thousands of people killed. Some tanks of the 11th Cavalry Squadron tried to cut through the sand dunes east of the coastal road, but ran straight into the 27th Regiment on the B5 Front, supported by

Captured tanks inside Quang Tri were pressed into service with the depleted North Vietnamese units. This column shows the main vehicles in service with the ARVN, M113 APC, M41, and the M48 tanks. (PAVN)

the 244th Armored Battalion that was trying to prevent any South Vietnamese fleeing by sea.

Realising the battle was being lost, the 147th Marine Brigade decided to fight its way out of the Quang Tri pocket and it was one of the few units, along with the 5th Ranger Group and a few tanks, that actually reached the South Vietnamese lines north of Hue. Commander Brigadier General Giai and his skeleton staff, obeying orders, had turned back and bunkered in the old citadel of the deserted city, now on the verge of occupation from four PAVN regiments and 60 tanks. A USAF CH-53 helicopter came in to rescue the division's advisory personnel and pluck their South Vietnamese counterparts from the fray. A total of 132 people were saved from the citadel, including 80 American advisors. The last CH-53 helicopter flew out of Quang Tri City at 1655 hours on 2 May 1972, under communist infantry fire. This marked the fall of the first South Vietnamese regional capital, with the equivalent of more than two South Vietnamese divisions having been destroyed in the fighting. The North Vietnamese had also paid a heavy price, losing nearly a third of its forces in the last five days of fighting. Yet even if they needed urgent supplies, their morale was high after all their successes on the field, and the taking of this capital boosted their resolve still further.

CHAPTER 6
STALEMATE AT HUE

The fall of Quang Tri triggered other South Vietnamese disasters including a series of losses at the Central Highlands and in MR III. The advance of the PAVN in MR I was even threatening Hue itself, with the North Vietnamese 324B Division taking areas in the west and southwest to wear down the ARVN 1st Division. With this, the South Vietnamese were being surrounded and the Saigon regime was clearly under threat, especially due to the loss of a series of fire-support bases at the end of April, including Veghel on the southern sector, as well as Bastogne and Checkmate – leading east towards Hue. The PAVN divisions that had conquered the Quang Tri Province were now also pushing south to take the My Chanh Bridge, which led to the Thua Thien Province and Hue. On 2 May panic struck the city, as two PAVN regiments with 18 T-54s attacked positions held by the 369th Marine Brigade who were forced to retreat onto the southern bank by destroying a bridge and evacuating FSB Nancy. Hearing this, the streets of Hue teemed with screaming residents and fleeing troops who fought with police to break out and run for Da Nang.

When things were eventually brought under control it was decided that the people of Hue needed someone to blame – the

The ARVN set up a new defensive line south of the My Chanh River, trying to stop the communist advance against Hue. This battery of M107 175mm guns pounded the advancing North Vietnamese and was the only self-propelled gun used by the ARVN. (ARVN)

The North Vietnamese tried in vain to breach the My Chanh River Front by launching several assaults in early May 1972, often at night. The Marines always held firm and these Type 63s are seen during one of those attacks. (PAVN)

These two Type 63s from the PAVN 244th Armored Battalion 'bumped' each other during a failed night assault against the VNMC 369th Marine Brigade, on 22 May 1972. (ARVN)

The Americans deliver brand new BGM-71 TOW ATGMs which helped the Marines push back several armor-led attacks against their positions south of the My Chanh River. South Vietnam was the first foreign user of the TOW, even before Israel. (USMC)

The ARVN Joint General Staff decided to commit the entire Airborne Division to the defense of Hue. The Paratroopers are seen boarding USAF C-130s at Bien Hoa Airbase to be flown north to Da Nang. (Pham Quang Khiem Collection)

South Vietnamese couldn't admit that they were losing the battle, so Commander Brigadier General Giai became the scapegoat. He was quickly court-martialled and imprisoned for five years, and was just as quickly replaced by Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, who assumed command of the I Corps on 3 May. Facing a crisis of an unprecedented scale, President Thieu was forced to act and decided to reshuffle the ARVN High Command, demoting incompetent commanders and immediately promoting more capable ones. Lieutenant General Truong had already served in the area as commander of the 1st Division and turned it into one of the best outfits. Since then he was highly rated by the American advisors who considered him the best general in South Vietnam. He accepted the new charge under the condition that he could select his own staff, made of officers chosen for their abilities and dedication. The same afternoon he flew directly to Hue, where he moved the I Corps Command Post and immediately set about restructuring command, firing those he felt were underperforming. On this day, he also went to the local radio station to broadcast a message asking troops to present themselves to military authorities and that any deserters would be shot. He also told local residents that their city would be defended and held at all costs.

With his appointment, some sense of order returned to Hue and, along with senior advisor, Major General Howard H Cooksey, he laid down plans to blunt the North Vietnamese advance. Lieutenant General Truong began by redefining separate operational areas for each main unit, with the Marine Division and its three brigades now responsible for the north and northeast sectors of Hue's defense. The 1st Division had to contend with the south and southwest sectors, whilst its two remaining regiments were drafted to the 54th Regiment, which had been seriously mauled in the battle for FSB Bastogne. It was the first time that the I Corps unit had been given clear orders and responsibilities, and in addition, each division was given opportunity to conduct limited objective attacks to destroy enemy concentrations on its sectors. Lieutenant General Truong hoped to gain time to complete the process of rebuilding and refitting those units which had disintegrated during the month of April. He was greatly helped by the USAF which set up an air bridge with C-141 and C-5 transports to bring additional equipment and weapons into Da Nang Airbase. The 3rd Division was sent to Da Nang to be reconstituted.

The 1st Armored Brigade had also to be rebuilt from scratch because the unit had suffered 1,171 casualties and lost 43 M-48s, 66 M-41s and 103 M-113s. Lieutenant General Truong knew his force needed refitting quickly and requested additional forces and the whole Airborne Division was transferred to I Corps. The 2nd Airborne Brigade arrived at Hue on 8 May, whilst the remaining

Saigon was forced to reshuffle the I Corps Command Headquarters after the disaster at Quang Tri. President Thieu then appointed Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong as head of the Corps, who was probably the best ARVN commander. (ARVN)

A C-5A Galaxy helps an M41 tank disembark at Da Nang in May 1972. These massive American deliveries enabled the rebuilding of the destroyed ARVN 1st Armored Brigade. (USAF)

1st and 3rd Brigades completed their deployment at the end of May. The Paratroopers now manned the reinforced northwest sector in the northern perimeter, and the 1st Division the west and southwest sectors. The Marines also became charged with the now refitted 1st Ranger Group. Lieutenant General Truong also spent time setting up comprehensive reserves and fully integrated regular and regional forces.

By June, there were also around 40 US Navy destroyers and cruisers operating in the gun line and the continual pounding of communist positions seriously disrupted their deployment. Lieutenant General Truong took advantage of their current situation and launched a large-scale offensive called Operation Loi Phon (Thunder Hurricane) in conjunction with the I Corps who launched a series of impressive attacks. On 13 May, two battalions of the 369th Marine Brigade were dropped by helicopter squadron USMC HHM-164 10km southeast of Quang Tri and swept through their objectives without loss. Two days later, the 1st Division launched a surprise helicopter assault which retook FSB Bastogne while its two regiments cleared the high grounds south of FSB Birmingham. A link-up was made the next day and ten days later, FSB Checkmate was also retaken while a Type 59 and two PT-76s of the 4th Battalion of the 203rd Armored Brigade were captured intact in their dug-out positions. In response, the PAVN launched an armor-led assault in the Marines' sector on 21 May along Route 1, and from the eastern side with the 19th and 27th Regiments supported by the 66th and 244th Armored Battalions. The 198th Armored Battalion opened the way on the western side to the 304th Division. The APCs and amphibious tanks were ordered to cross the My Chanh River and to hold a bridgehead in the eastern sector. The 1st Company of the 244th Armored Battalion succeeded in capturing the Thanh Huong Village on the other bank and deployed its Type 63s in order to cover the battalion crossing. The North Vietnamese pushed the ARVN back 7km, and a tank assault the next day nearly reached the Marine Brigade Command Post where five North Vietnamese Type 63s were destroyed, until the North Vietnamese were finally forced back to the other side of the Thac Ma ford.

Undeterred by this constant PAVN probing, the Marines launched a counter-offensive on 24 May with the 147th Marine Brigade, supported by the 9th US Marine Amphibious Brigade, at My Thuy, 10km north of the My Chanh River defense line. They were also helped by a newly set up amphibious tractor battalion equipped with LVTP-5s. It was the first time that the Marine Division executed an assault from the sea and, simultaneously, a helicopter assault took place at Co Luy, 6km west of the coastline Both forces swept through the area and returned to the My Chanh River after several days of

In order to confuse the North Vietnamese, the ARVN in May and June 1972 launched several false amphibious assaults from the sea. These Vietnamese Marines boarded US Navy LCM barges at Tan My naval base northwest of Hue for one such hoax operation. (USMC)

operations. Unfortunately though, this sweep caused little damage to the 304th Division, who themselves mounted an offensive on 26 May. This time, the North Vietnamese attacked along the coastal area held by RF and Ranger battalions.

In Thanh Huong village itself, elements of the 37th Ranger Battalion were attacked by a platoon of PAVN Type 63 tanks and four K-63 APCs. The attack was carried out so suddenly that it took the AVRN forces by surprise but, without enough supporting troops, the PAVN withdrew, highlighting their weakened state. Yet, they kept coming back and launched a breach-attempt on the western sector of Route 1 by engaging the 304th Division and one regiment from the 324B Division. Some 50 T-54s, Type 59s and T-34-85s were assembled to support the attack but B-52 bombing disrupted the axes, whilst enemy artillery rained down on the 1st and 9th Marine Battalions. The tanks that breached the wire defenses had once again moved away from the supporting infantry and thus the Marines claimed 10, by attacking them with their M72s, whilst mobile teams armed with TOW missile launchers roamed the southern bank, searching for enemy tanks on the opposite side. When night came, the North Vietnamese had again been beaten and this proved to be the last large-scale offensive carried out on the My Chanh River. More than 3,000 North Vietnamese died and the Americans estimated that the PAVN had lost some 64 tanks and APCs in the offensive against Hue. Throughout May and June, Lieutenant General Truong continued to launch limited offensives which forced PAVN off-balance and stalled their attacks, whilst restoring a little morale amongst ARVN troops.

CHAPTER 7
THE ARVN ON THE OFFENSIVE

By early June, the PAVN offensive was checked and the North Vietnamese tidal wave was receding. The communists had seen their effort blunted due to massive losses from US air attacks which had steadily increased in frequency and intensity. The Tri-Thien Theater had received only 30 percent of its required needs and this lack of fuel, coupled with the beginning of the rain season, made motorized operations much more difficult. Furthermore, malaria raged among the troops – particularly amongst the tank crews – and all this led to the North Vietnamese being forced into defensive positions. In MR I, Hanoi's forces were firmly entrenched by the DMZ down south to the gates of Hue City. They reorganized their defenses along three successive lines and the 304th, 308th and 320B Divisions were aligned along the Thac Hanh River, Hai Lang and inside Quang Tri. They were reinforced in July by the 325C and 312th Divisions, with this last unit having being redeployed from Laos. The 324B Division still posed a threat west of Hue while the 2nd and 711th Divisions continued to launch diversionary attacks south of Da Nang.

Lieutenant General Truong amassed 15 artillery battalions to attack north of the My Chanh River line, like this battery of M101 105mm howitzers. (ARVN)

The South Vietnamese launched a multi-phased offensive in early June 1972 to retake Quang Tri. These Vietnamese Marines are boarding USMC CH-46 helicopters during one of these operations. (USMC)

The armors were dispersed in caves dug out in the hills west of Quang Tri in camouflaged trenches and in the ruins of Dong Ha and Quang Tri – kept in reserve for counter-attacks or as reinforcement. The North Vietnamese still also deployed around 100 tanks north of Hue, and the coastal area was covered by the 320B Division and the 27th Regiment of the B5 Front – reinforced by the 244th Armored Battalion and the 5th Company of the 512th Armored Battalion. The area west of Route 1 was defended by the 308th, 304th and 312th Divisions – strengthened by the 3rd and 512th Battalions of the 203rd Armored Regiment – and the 198th Battalion of the 202nd Armored Regiment. To defend Hue, the ARVN I Corps relied on the 1st Division as well as the Airborne and Marine Divisions, whilst the 2nd Division had to contend with the southern sector and the 3rd Division served as a central reserve. With everything in place, Lieutenant General Truong went to Saigon proposing a plan to hit the PAVN hard. Thieu appeared reluctant at first because he found the scheme too ambitious but he eventually agreed and gave the go-ahead.

Operation Lam Son 72

Lieutenant General Truong's Operation Lam Son 72 was a phased attack which aimed to protect the western flank of the Hue perimeter and destroy PAVN forces rather than to reoccupy territories. He wanted to avoid costly urban fighting and the reoccupation of Quang Tri City, whilst a temptingly symbolic target, was not an objective of his. He carefully prepared his logistical and fire support with his senior advisor, Major General Cooksey, and it was envisaged that the ARVN breakthrough from Hue would start from Phase Line Gold, along the My Chanh River, and move up to the PAVN second-line defenses at Phase Line Blue along the Thac Hanh River. The next advance phase would see a push up north towards Dong Ha City and the Cua Viet River. From 11 to 27 June, Lieutenant General Truong began the preparatory phase of the offensive with diversionary and deceptive operations to confuse the North Vietnamese as to the timing and direction of the main effort.

To mislead, the 1st Division attacked west of Hue in the direction of FSB Veghel; then the Marines and the Paratroopers launched probing

South Vietnamese Marines board a USMC CH-46D from the HMM-164 squadron. The helicopter was part of an assault carried out south of Quang Tri in June 1972. (USMC)

Vietnamese Marines board the USS *Okinawa* on 23 May 1972. They would participate in an amphibious assault that would take place against the Wunder Beach (My Thuy), south of Quang Tri the next day. (USMC)

The ARVN counter-offensive to recapture Quang Tri began at the end of June 1972 with Operation Lam Son 72. The attack moved out methodically with the support of the reconstituted 1st Armored Brigade. (ARVN)

attacks across the My Chanh River, and the North Vietnamese reacted strongly along the coastal area deploying tanks. Simultaneously, ARVN troops simulated a landing at the mouth of the Cua Viet River near the North Vietnamese border. A false amphibious task force was assembled offshore with the ships of the US Navy Task Force 76 while the area was subjected to intense naval and air bombardment. The heavy cruiser USS *Newport News* joined in the battle line for the coastal shelling with the objective to draw away PAVN forces from the frontlines by threatening to cut the PAVN logistic pathways. On 27 June, the American amphibious forces moved to the objective area and landed with LVPT-5 amphibious tractors carrying Vietnamese Marines. Helicopters of the HMM-165 were launched from the USS *Tripoli* (LPH 10) and headed for the beach. However, 10 minutes later the forces reversed direction 5,000 yards from the shore, but the PAVN did not seem to fall into the trap and few forces were observed to be fooled. The attack proper was finally launched on 28 June in a two-pronged and northward directon, starting from Hue. The Airborne Division would make the main push, attacking the southwestern side of Route 1 towards La Kang, while the Marine Division would support it by moving along Route 555 towards Trieu Phong – both of them supported in turn by the reconstituted I Armor Brigade, with some 290 tanks and APCs. There were also several Ranger Groups as well

Spearheading the ARVN counter-offensive were the armored units attached to the Airborne and Marine Divisions, as well as the Ranger Groups and regional battalions. These M113s belong to the reconstituted 11th ACS. (ARVN)

The Airborne Division took the lead in the first phase of the ARVN offensive to retake Quang Tri. This airborne 105mm artillery battery fires on North Vietnamese fortified positions south of the city. (ARVN)

as 12 RF battalions in support. The 1st Division, meanwhile, had to pin down the enemy forces at Hue's southern perimeter and troops benefited from much fire support with some 15 artillery battalions and a daily average of 150 sorties. The North Vietnamese themselves would report sustaining up to 237 air strike sorties and over 17,000 artillery shells daily.

Apart from a few regimental clashes in the first few days, when ARVN crossed the PAVN first lines of defense across the My Chang River, the enemy had withdrawn towards its prepared positions along the Thach River, avoiding large-scale set-piece battles. The Airborne Division continued its advance without much resistance, but that was not the case for the Marines, who faced a series of intricate and supporting fortified positions that halted their advance. In order to break this stalemate, some 1,500 Marines landed in an amphibious operation at Landing Zone Columbus, between the main Route 1 and the smaller Route 555. However, unknown to them, the chosen beach was close to a camouflaged PAVN tank park. In order to relieve this pressure, Lieutenant General Truong ordered a helicopter assault behind the North Vietnamese main line of resistance along the coast. On 29 June, the VNMC 1st and 4th Battalions were picked up at Tan My by the CH-46s and CH-53s of the HMM-164 and HMM-

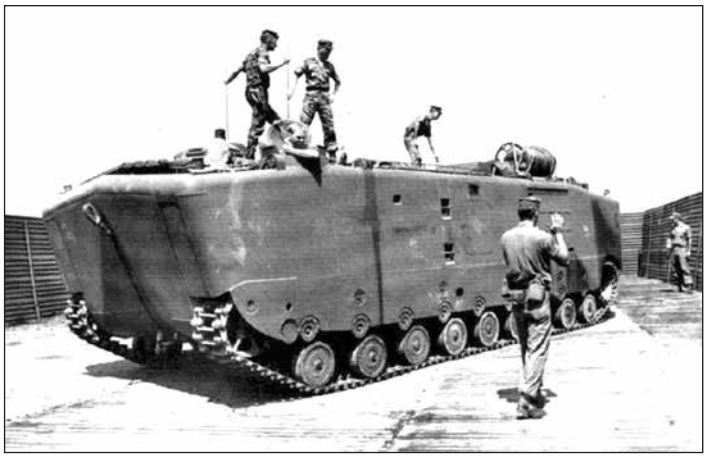
The CH-46Ds from the HMM-165 from the PLD USS *Tripoli* have arrived to pick up South Vietnamese Marines. They would be inserted in positions behind enemy lines around Quang Tri on 11 July 1972. (USMC)

This AH-1G Cobra from an unidentified US Army aviation unit was forced down for unknown reasons behind communist lines near Quang Tri. The fate of the crew is unknown. (PAVN)

On 27 June 1972, the South Vietnamese Marines again simulated another amphibious assault from the LPD USS *Tripoli* in order to attract the North Vietnamese towards the coastal area southeast of Quang Tri. (USMC)

165, operating from the USS *Tripoli* and *Okinawa* – and flown to near the Wunder Beach. The disembarking 1,450 South Vietnamese Marines surprised the enemy, who rushed in tanks and APCs but were smashed by the covering destroyers operating some 4,000m offshore. During June, the South Vietnamese claimed 1,515 enemies had been killed and 18 armored vehicles destroyed.

On 7 July, the Paratroopers finally reached the outskirts of Quang Tri City after overwhelming a series of strongpoints, including former French blockhouses defended by tanks. At least 12 T-54s were claimed but the North Vietnamese resistance had increased dramatically. In



The USMC handed over some 31 amphibious tractors to their South Vietnamese counterparts in October. This included 1 LVTR-5, 2 LVTC-5s and 28 LVTP-5s that served to set up an amphibious tractor battalion. (USMC)

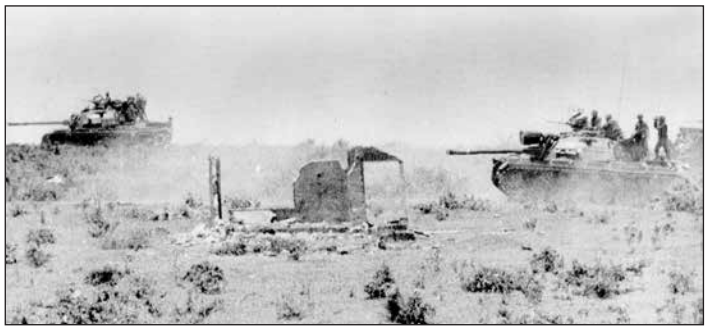
By early July 1972, the ARVN had reached the outskirts of Quang Tri and put the city under siege. An M-48A3 from the rebuilt 20th Tank Squadron passes the ruins of a catholic church. (US Army)

fact, the PAVN had actually decided to make a stand inside Quang Tri itself, and drew the South Vietnamese towards them. They reorganized their forces around the town and sucked the advancing enemy into a costly street fight on a terrain of its choosing. The next three months would rage, and dozens of battalions would pour into the cauldron, which became one of the most ferocious battles of the entire Vietnam War.

The siege of Quang Tri

Initially, the ARVN I Corps hoped to catch and encircle the North Vietnamese forces inside Quang Tri before they were reinforced, but a drive on the west flank of the city by Paratroopers failed. The Marine Division tried now to outflank via the east but also encountered fierce resistance which meant they were now tied in battle, whilst a series of helicopter raids north of Quang Tri began to disorganize the North Vietnamese supply lines. The first raid was launched on 11 July when the VNMC 1st Battalion was inserted by 34 USMC CH-46s and CH-53s – escorted by six US Army AH-1G Cobras – into Landing Zones Blue Jay and Crow, 2km northeast of the city close to the Vinh Dinh River. In the last approach phase, the helicopters encountered heavy anti-aircraft barrage that shot down two CH-46s and a CH-53. The CH-53, carrying 55 Vietnamese Marines, was hit by a SAM-7 and went

The North Vietnamese used the 9K11 Malyutka (NATO codenamed AT-3 Sagger) ATGM missile for the first time around Quang Tri. These two operators are installing the 9P111 portable launcher and 9S415 command box with its 9Sh16 aiming periscope. (PAVN)



Two Pattons from the 20th Tank Squadron advance cautiously with observers using binoculars to spot any possible hiding AT-3 Sagger launch sites. (ARVN)

down, and in fact, nearly all the remaining helicopters were damaged. In one situation, Major Nguyen Dang Hoa had to lead his men in hand-to-hand fighting across two lines of trenches in order to secure their landing zone. They were finally rescued by the 7th Marine Battalion attacking north with a troop of Pattons. Together, they retreated back towards the South Vietnamese lines and ran over the 202nd Armored Regiment Command Post. In the ensuing fight, the M48s destroyed six T-54s and PT-76s and around 10 trucks while inflicting casualties on the 48th Regiment. In order to improve the Marines' logistic, the US Seventh Fleet would build a five-section causeway at Wunder Beach on 13 July. Following this, the next helicopter assault took place on 22 July on Landing Zones Lima and Victor, 7km farther north. The 147th Marine Brigade would use its 5th Battalion for the vertical envelopment, while the two remaining battalions would move by land to link up with it. The amphibious task force's USS *Okinawa*, St Louis (LKA 116), Manitowoc (LST 1180), and Point Defiance (LSD 31) moved into position to launch their helicopters.

The North Vietnamese retaliated by trying to force the Airborne Division from its positions south of Quang Tri and to cut Route 1. A series of night assaults were launched, each supported by small groups of two to three tanks whilst other tanks waited to ambush, well camouflaged in the ruined buildings. The 308th Division now tried to relieve this pressure and attacked the southeast sector on 9 July, and even though it could not advance far because troops were being pinned down on their departure positions, some 24 T-54s of the 203rd Armored Regiment succeeded in passing through. However, without reinforcements, they were soon forced to retreat after the TOW and fighter-bombers had destroyed nine tanks.

The South Vietnamese continued to advance slowly but relentlessly, street by street, and most of the North Vietnamese forces were now

While the offensive to retake Quang Tri degenerated into a long and bloody siege, the fighting continued west of Hue, along a line of crests overlooking the city. Troops of the ARVN 1st Division spot this North Vietnamese PT-76B light tank, hiding under camouflage branches. (US Army)

The ARVN 1st Division fought a series of difficult battles against the PAVN. The 324B Division was anchored on a series of outposts built on the hilltops west of Hue. One of the most contested places was FSB Bastogne which changed hands several times. South Vietnamese prevailed at last at the end of the summer 1972 and, when reoccupying the position, they found this abandoned T-54 tank and some 37mm AA guns. (ARVN)

The ARVN 1st Division held a series of outposts along the crest line west of Hue, shielding the ancient capital from the North Vietnamese advance. This VNAF Bell UH-1H gunship helicopter flies low to hide from enemy anti-aircraft fire during a close-support mission for FSB Birmingham. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

anchored around the old citadel. On the night of 19 July some 10 T-54s and a battalion of infantry withstood a Paratrooper attack on the southern wall of the citadel at the cost of two tanks. In order to ease the pressure around Quang Tri, the North Vietnamese renewed probing attacks against the Hue perimeter. Throughout July, the FSB checkmate was the scene of fierce combat and it changed hands several times – by the end of that month, FSB Bastogne was lost

An ARVN M42 Duster opens fire against a North Vietnamese position, blocking the advance of the Paratroopers. Its twin Bofor 40mm guns could lay down a tremendous volume of fire. (ARVN)

The Americans urgently delivered over 50 M48A3s to replenish the 20th Tank Squadron. The reshuffled unit was immediately engaged in operations for the recapture of Quang Tri. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

By August 1972, it was the Marine Division that replaced the Paratroopers at the spearhead of the counter-offensive to retake Quang Tri. They had to subdue several enemy defensive lines, capturing many types of equipment, including this BS-3 100mm anti-tank gun. (VNMC)

one more time. At this point 1st Division was reinforced by the 51st Regiment that helped to stabilize the front, and in early August they retook FSB Bastogne and FSB Checkmate. Further south, the PAVN 711th Division had also increased its pressure tactics on the southern portion of MR I, focussing its efforts mainly along the Que Song

South Vietnamese Marines also captured a number of North Vietnamese armored vehicles in their drive to retake Quang Tri. This included the SPK-5 which was a retrieval variant of the T-34-85 tank. (VNMC)

Another variant of the T-34-85 tank was this self-propelled anti-aircraft vehicle captured by the South Vietnamese Marines. The vehicle was locally modified in the workshops in North Vietnam with a specially designed open turret, housing a twin 37mm AA gun. A company of at least 18 such vehicles was used during the Quang Tri Battle. (VNMC)

Valley from June to September. Da Nang Airbase was also rocketed several times and remote district towns in the foothills areas of the Quang Ngai Province were overrun by the PAVN 2nd Division after protracted sieges. The local 2nd ARVN Division counter-attacked by the end of the summer and retook them all.

With this, it appeared that any hope to quickly occupy Quang Tri had faded and Lieutenant General Truong was forced to reassess force deployments. He opted for a switchover, so that the Marine Division would now take over the brunt of the effort from the lighter Airborne Division. This division would now reverse to a supporting role operating on the western side of Route 1, while the Marines would concentrate its drive on its eastern side. However, instead of pushing in force inside the town in a costly battle, Lieutenant General Truong chose to use Quang Tri as a 'meat grinder' to destroy the bulk of PAVN forces in MR I. He reasoned that it would be far better to hit the North Vietnamese divisions with his superior firepower than to fight them around Hue over very difficult terrain. Thus, the battle soon degenerated into a bloody positional fight with intense artillery duels. The ARVN advance was slow and Lieutenant General Truong regularly rotated his frontline units so they could rest and be refitted. In contrast, the North Vietnamese did not have the luxury of being

This M48A3 from the 20th Tank Squadron found itself in an awkward situation after the floating bridge collapsed. It took the ARVN engineer troops several hours to retrieve it, clearing the crossing over the Thach River. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

After encountering ferocious resistance in August 1972, the South Vietnamese Marines finally managed to expand their foothold on the outskirts of the Quang Tri. It would take another seven weeks of ferocious street-fighting before they could secure the city. (VNMC).

able to pull their forces back and were constantly pounded by US air and naval firepower. Throughout July, the North Vietnamese inside and around Quang Tri endured some 5,461 tactical and 2,054 B-52 sorties.

In early August it was now the turn of the Marines to take over the offensive and they immediately faced intense fighting in vicious street combats. Entire PAVN battalions were poured into Quang Tri at night and their fierce resistance stunned the Marines. Communist artillery was also particularly effective because even if they were being forced to move in order to escape detection by air, the dispersed and camouflaged guns were able to lay down coordinated and precise fire plans that earned the admiration of the US advisors. Over 50,000 shells hit the South Vietnamese positions in the western and southern parts of the city in August, and an attempt by the Marines to expand their foothold in the western sector with an attack against the Tan My Village by the 258th Brigade failed. Even on 22 August, when the 8th Marine Battalion succeeded in reaching the walls of the citadel, they were immediately counter-attacked by several enemy battalions supported by 10 T-54s. This presence of North Vietnamese tanks inside the city was a thorny issue for the American and ARVN intelligence teams because despite constant air reconnaissance and observation,

On 7 September 1972, the USMC Brigadier General Edward J. Miller of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, reviewed a battalion of South Vietnamese Rangers at the Tan My Naval Base. They would soon board assault ships for a new false amphibious landing. (USMC)

It took the South Vietnamese more than two months of urban fighting to take back Quang Tri. The ARVN was amazed by the fanatical defense offered by the North Vietnamese troops. (ARVN)

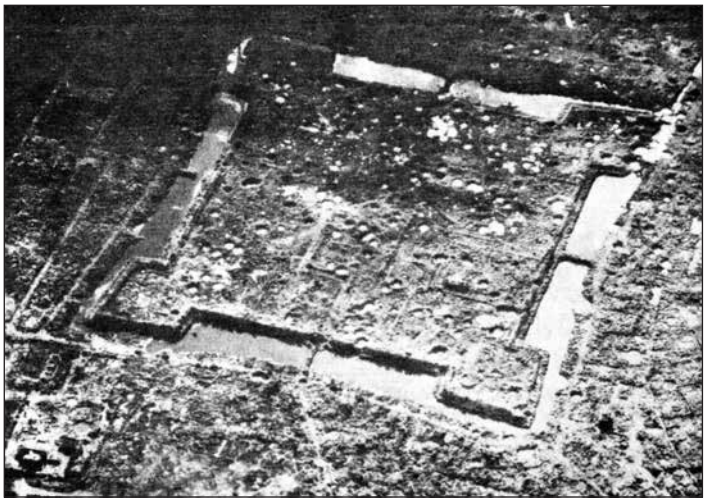
For weeks, each side fought inside the devastated Quang Tri for a street or a building that changed sides several times. The weapon of choice was the hand grenade, like this one being thrown by a Paratrooper. (ARVN)

they kept going unspotted.

On 8 September, after seven weeks of stalemate, the South Vietnamese decided that they had weakened the enemy enough to resume their advance. The offensive started with another false amphibious landing to draw away PAVN forces, and a small force of 400 Rangers was loaded on the USS *Juneau* (LPD 10) for the supposed

The PAVN launched several armor led counter-attacks around Quang Tri. This South Vietnamese Marine takes a rest near a disabled BTR-50PK. (VNMC)

These South Vietnamese Paratroopers capture one of the feared M-46 130mm guns. It outclassed any American artillery piece present in Vietnam in both range and precision. (ARVN)



An aerial view of the Quang Tri Citadel taken in August 1972. Built in 1824, this old imperial fort returned to its original role when the North Vietnamese decided to turn it into their last stronghold inside Quang Tri. (USAF)

surface assault. Naval gunfire and tactical air strikes opened on the diversionary area, a beach north of the Cua Viet Estuary, and B-52s hit the intended landing zone as the Rangers sped towards it in landing crafts and in HMM-165 helicopters. The ships turned back at 10,000 yards, and the CH-46s at 5,000 yards from the shore. The North Vietnamese reacted by rushing additional artillery towards the area along with anti-aircraft guns, so when infantry left the cover of

The communists decided to make a stand at Quang Tri for both military and political reasons. They turned the provincial capital into a stronghold, using it to wear down the most elite South Vietnamese divisions. (PAVN)

the tree line to take position along the beaches, they suffered heavy casualties.

In the meantime, the Airborne Division with two armored squadrons and a Patton troop, had occupied positions at La Vang, south of the citadel and provided excellent protection for the southern flank of Marines. The next day, the Marines were reinforced by two armored squadrons and M48s, and launched the main assault against the citadel. Progress towards the walls was slow because the North Vietnamese had tunnelled an intricate and interlocking defensive system within the Vauban-style fortress. However, on 14 September the 6th Marine Battalion penetrated its southeast corner with laser-guided bombs dropped by Phantom fighter-bombers. During the following day, more Marines burst through whilst other units attacked the eastern and southern faces. The North Vietnamese reacted by showering heavy artillery fire.

While the battle for the citadel was taking place, the 1st VNMC Battalion had secured the bridgehead where Route 1 crossed the Thach Han River, and held it despite several PAVN counter-attacks. From 11 to 15 September, the 2nd VNMC Battalion also reached the river, closing the gap between the 1st and 6th Battalions. On 15 September, the Marines finally regained control of the citadel and by the following afternoon the last PAVN pockets of resistance were eliminated. The South Vietnamese expanded their control over the entire city, which was now in ruins, and on 20 September President Thieu flew into the city to congratulate his troops and officially declare the end of the Quang Tri siege.

During the 10 days of assaults on the citadel, some 2,767 North Vietnamese troops had been killed and 43 captured. The Marine Division casualties averaged 150 a day, making an total of 3,658 during the seven weeks of fighting. Furthermore since June, 5,000 lives were lost which was about 25 percent of its strength. The North Vietnamese leaders in turn praised their tank-men in operations which became sacrificial at the end. They carried out 24 combat operations inside the city of which only eight could be considered successes. The level of PAVN operations decreased markedly until 30 September when the Airborne Division launched attacks to recapture FSB Barbara. The advance was accompanied by fierce artillery barrages and drenching monsoon rains. It took a month for the exhausted Paratroopers to secure the area before shifting their attack to recapture FSB Anne on the north and stopping enemy advance south of Dong Ha.

In the meantime, the 1st Division had continued its expansion

The North Vietnamese created interlocking defensive positions inside Quang Tri, with machine gun nests; artillery; and dig-in positions for tanks. A mortar team mans an 82mm inside the citadel. (PAVN)

These Paratroopers are fighting their way into the ruins of Quang Tri. One man uses an M79 40mm grenade launcher, a weapon well suited to this kind of urban fighting. (ARVN)

On 14 September 1972, the 6th Marine Battalion penetrated the southeast corner-side of the citadel through a breach opened by laser-guided bombs dropped by Phantom fighter-bombers. The last North Vietnamese resistance inside Quang Tri was subdued two days later. (ARVN)

The ARVN tried in vain to reach the DMZ before the cease-fire of 27 January 1973 by attacking towards the Cua Viet River estuary. The armored Task Forces Tango and Bravo suffered heavily, like these two destroyed Pattons. (PAVN)

of the Hue defense perimeter and had launched a new offensive on 19 September, which succeeded in reoccupying the most remote of the lost positions – FSB Veghel – southwest of the city. In torrential rain, the North Vietnamese had reorganized their defenses along the Thac Han River in the north of the MR I and were determined to assure the land they had captured would remain part of North Vietnamese territory. Similarly, with the approach of a ceasefire the South Vietnamese tried by any means to expand their controlled areas and to take back lost territories. The Marine Division tried to reach the Cua Viet River estuary and began a series of probing reconnaissance missions in December but the very bad weather, with several typhoons hitting the region, made any progress meaningless because many plains were flooded and bridges washed away. Another attack was then duly launched towards Dong Ha along Route 560 and the North Vietnamese counter-attacked, engaging a company of PT-76s of the 202nd Armored Regiment. During several clashes, the unit claimed one M48, two M113s and one 105mm howitzer, but the main thrust was again directed along the coastal sector when the South Vietnamese launched a new offensive, Operation Song Than 18, on 17 January 1973.

The 147th and 258th Marine Brigades, with the 1st Armored Brigade, formed two armored Task Forces (TF Tango and Bravo) that advanced side by side. After three days of encountering scattered resistance, the South Vietnamese secured the estuary of the Cua Viet River. They now tried to push forwards heading north, hoping to reach the DMZ on 26 January, but they were immediately halted by the PAVN 101st Regiment, supported by the 66th Armored Battalion.

That unit had suffered much during the previous fighting and could only deploy three depleted companies, which together could deploy only 15 APCs and a single Type 63 tank. The battalion chose to send its tanks along a predicted enemy axis, creating a series of strongpoints with infantry and BS-3 100mm heavy anti-tank guns. In fact, the sandy terrains with inner lagoons would force the ARVN advance into narrow trails that did not allow them to redeploy their vehicles and to fully exploit their numerical superiority. Three Marine battalions tried to take the small port of Thanh Hoi, but the column of 80 M48s and M113s fell into a series of ambushes and lost 15 tanks. On the night of 26 January, the Marines launched no less than six assaults but could not break though, and by the end of 27 January the South Vietnamese had lost 26 tanks, while two VNAF A-37s had been brought down by the SAM-7s.

However, at 0700 the following morning, Task Force Bravo finally smashed into Thanh Hoi and headed for the central marketplace, where the South Vietnamese flag was duly raised. International observers were flown in on helicopters to announce the Peace Accords.

Bibliography

Andrade, Dale, *America's Last Vietnam Battle; Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London & New York: Routledge Curzon (Taylor & Francis, 2002).

Bowers, Ray L., *Tactical Airlift* (Washington: Office of Air Force History & GPO, 1983).

Brighman, Robert K., *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

Des Brisay, Captain Thomas D., *Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang. USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series. Volume III, Monographs 4 & 5* (Washington DC: GPO, 1977).

Cao Van Vien, General, & Dong Van Khuyen, Lietenant General, *Indochina Monographs: Reflections on the Vietnam War* (Washington DC: GPO, 1980).

Cao Van Vien, General, & Ngo Quang Truong, Lieutenant General, & Dong Van Khuyen, Lieutenant General, & Nguyen Duy Hinh, Major General, & Tran Dinh Tho, Colonel Brigadier General, & Hoang Ngoc Lung, & Chu Xuan Vien, Lietenat Colonel, *Indochina Monographs: The U.S. Adviser* (Washington DC: GPO, 1980).

Cao Van Vien, General, *Indochina Monographs: Leadership* (Washington DC: GPO, 1980).

Clodfelter, Mark, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989).

Collins Jr., Brigadier General James, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 1986).

Conboy, Ken, & Bowra, Ken, *The NVA and Viet Cong* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1991).

Conboy, Ken, *Shadow War; the CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder CO: Paladin Press, 1995).

Cosmos, Graham A., & Murray, Terrence P, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment, 1970-1971* (Washington DC: History & Museums Division, 1986).

Da Nguyen Xuan Mau, *Dien Bien Phu Tren Khong: Hoi Ky / Dien Bien Phu Battle of the Sky 1972* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2007).

Despuech, Jacques C., *L'offensive du Vendredi Saint* (Paris: Fayard, 1973).

Doglione, Colonel John A., *Airpower and the 1972 Spring Invasion. USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series Volume II* (Washington DC: GPO, 1976).

Dong Van Khuyen, Lietenant General, *Indochina Monographs: RVNAF Logistics* (Washington DC: GPO, 1980).

Dorr, Robert F., *Air War South Vietnam* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1990).

Duiker, William J., *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995).

Grandolini, Albert, *Armor of the Vietnam War; Asian Forces* (Hong Kong: Concord Publications Company, 1998).

Ha Mai Viet, *Steel and Blood: South Vietnamese Armor and the War for Southeast Asia*. (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008).

Jackson, George J., *Linebacker II: An Examination of Strategic Use of Air Power* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University, 1989).

Lam Quang Thi, *The Twenty-Five Year Century: A South Vietnamese General Remembers the Indochina War to the Fall of Saigon* (Denton TX: University of North Texas Press, 2001).

Larsen, Lietenant General Stanley R., & Collins, Brigadier General James L Jr., *Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington DC: GPO, 1975).

Le Hai Trieu, *Su doan 10: binh doan Tay nguyen* (Hanoi: Nha xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan / Vietnam People's Army Publishing House, 1987).

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

McCarthy, Brigader General James R. & Rayfield, Colonel Robert E., *Linebacker II: A View from the Rock. USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series. Volume VI*, (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air War College, 1979).

McKenna, Thomas P., *Kontum, the battle to save South Vietnam* (Lexington KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

Melson, Charles D., & Curtis, Arnold G., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The War that Would Not End, 1971-1973* (Washington DC: History & Museums Division, 1991).

Melson, Charles D., & Hannon, Paul, *Vietnam Marines 1965-1973* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd, 2012).

Merle, Pribbenow L.; Military History Institute of Vietnam. *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam 1954 -1975* (Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

Mesko, Jim, *VNAF: South Vietnamese Air Force: 1945-1975* (Carrollton TX: Squadron/Signal Publications, 1987).

Mikesh, Robert C., *Flying Dragons: The South Vietnamese Air Force* (London: Osprey Publishing, 1988).

Miller, Grider, John, *The Bridge at Dong Ha.* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989).

Momyer, General William, *The Vietnamese Air Force, 1951-1975, an Analysis of its Role in Combat. USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series. Volume III, Monographs 4 & 5* (Washington DC: GPO, 1977)

Nalty, Bernard C., *Air War over South Vietnam, 1968-1975* (Washington DC: Air Force History & Museums Program, 2001).

Ngo Quang Truong, Lieutenant General, *Indochina Monographs: The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington DC: GPO, 1979).

Ngo Quang Truong, Lieutenant General, *Indochina Monographs: RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination* (Washington DC: GPO, 1980).

Ngo Quang Truong, Lieutenant General, *Indochina Monographs: Territorial Forces*. (Washington DC: GPO, 1980).

Nguyen Duc Phuong, *Chien Thanh Viet Nam, Toan Tap, Tu Tran Dau (Ap Bac–1963) den Tran Cuoi (Saigon-1975). The Vietnam War, from the first (Ap Bac–1963) to the last (Saigon-1975) battles* (Toronto: Lang Van Publishers, 2001).

Nguyen Duy Hinh, Major General, & Tran Dinh Tho, Brigadier General, *Indochina Monographs: The South Vietnamese Society* (Washington DC: GPO, 1980).

Nguyen Duy Hinh, Major General, *Indochina Monographs: Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire* (Washington DC: GPO, 1980).

Nguyen Manh Dan, & Nguyen Ngoc Hanh, *Vietnam in flames. The General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam* (Saigon, 1971).

Pham Phong Dinh, *Chien Su Quan Luc Viet Nam Cong Hoa*. (Winnipeg: Tu Sach Vinh Danh, 2001). One chapter for each division, and each other major component of the RVNAF, in the 1970s.

Prados, John, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

Randolph, Stephan P., *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Rottman, Gordon L., *Khe Sanh 1967–1968; Marines battle for Vietnam's vital hilltop base. Campaign Series* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005).

Rottman, Gordon L. & Bujeiro, Ramiro, *Army of the Republic of Vietnam 1955–75* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010).

Rottman, Gordon L. & Volstad, Ron, *Vietnam Airborne* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2012).

Smith, John T., *The Linebacker Raids: The bombing of North Vietnam, 1972* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1998).

Starry, General Don A., *Vietnam Studies Series: Mounted Combat in Vietnam.* (Washington DC: US Army Center of Military History 1977).

Stockwell, David B., *Tanks in the Wire! The first use of enemy armor in Vietnam* (New York: Penguin, 1990).

The General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam, *Mat Tran Vung Gioi Tuyen (Quang Tri) 1972. P.5 TTM/Khoi Quan Su QLVNCH* (Saigon, 1974).

Thompson, Wayne, *To Hanoi and Back: The U.S. Air Force and North Vietnam, 1966-1973* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000).

Tilford, Jr. Earl H., *Setup: What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why* (Maxwell AFB AL: Air University Press, 1991).

Tran Dinh Tho, Brigadier General, *Indochina Monographs: The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington DC: GPO 1979).

Tran Dinh Tho, Brigadier General, *Indochina Monographs: Pacification* (Washington DC: GPO, 1980).

Tran Van Tra, *Nhung chang duong lich su cu B2 thanh dong*, 5 vols projected. Vol. 5, *Ket thuc cuoc chien tranh 30 nam*, was published first, (Ho Chi Minh City: Van Nghe, 1982), and was translated as *Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B-2 Theatre Volume 5*: *Concluding the 30-Years War*, JPRS 82783 (Springfield, VA: NTIS, 1983). It covered the period from 1973 to 1975.

Tran Xuan Dung, ed., *History of the Vietnamese Marine Corps, Army of the Republic of Vietnam/Chien Su Thuy Quan Luc Chien, Quan Luc Viet Nam Cong Hoa* (Toronto, 1997).

US Army Center of Military History, *Vietnam Studies Series: Nguyen Duy Hinh. Lam Son 719* (Washington DC: US Army CMH, 1979).

Vietnamese Military History Institute, *Su Doan Quan Tien Phong – Su Doan 308 / 308th Division History* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan / Vietnam People's Army Publishing House, 1979).

Vietnamese Military History Institute, *Lich Su Binh Chung Thiet Giap Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam 1959–1975 / Armour Corps History 1959*–1979 (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan / Vietnam People's Army Publishing House, 1982).

Vietnamese Military History Institute, *Su doan Sao Vang: Binh doan Chi Lang Quan khu 1 / The Gold Star Division: Chi Lang Corps, Military Region 1* (Hanoi: NXB Quan Doi Nhan Dan / Vietnam People's Army Publishing House, 1984).

Vietnamese Military History Institute, *Su Doan 303 / 303rd Division History* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan / Vietnam People's Army Publishing House, 1989).

Vietnamese Military History Institute, *Lich Su Lu Doan Tang 203 / 203rd Armored Brigade History* (Hanoi: Quan Doan 2 Xuat Ban / Vietnam People's Army Publishing House, 1990).

Vietnamese Military History Institute, *Su Doan 7 / 7th Division* History (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan / Vietnam People's Army Publishing House, 1990).

Vietnamese Military History Institute, *Lich Su Cong Binh Viet Nam 1945–1975 / Engineer Corps History 1945–1975* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan / Vietnam People's Army Publishing House, 1991).

Vietnamese Military History Institute, *Lich Su Quan Chung Phong Khong. 2 vols. / PAVN Air defense units in both of the Indochina wars* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan / Vietnam People's Army Publishing House, 1991 & 1993).

Vietnamese Military History Institute, *Tu Dien Bach Khoa Quan Su Viet Nam. Bo Quoc Phong. / Vietnamese Military Dictionary* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan / Vietnam People's Army Publishing House, 1996).

Whitcomb, Darrel D., *The Rescue of Bat 21* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998).

Wiest, Andrew, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to express his gratitude to all those who contributed to this book. Specifically, I wish to express my deepest appreciation to Anthony J. Tambini, Cao Tan Loc, Chau Huu Loc, Dang Huy Lang, Do Khac Mai, Ha Minh Tay, Ho Dac Du, Ha Mai Viet, Huynh Sanh Thong, Huynh Ba Phuc, Huynh Thu Thoai, Jean Dunoyer, Jean Pierre Hoehn, Ken Conboy, Le Quang Thuan, Le Xuan Lan, Mai Van Hai, Nguyen Tien Van, Nguyen Xuan Giac, Pham Long Suu, Pham Quang Khiem, Robert C. Mikesk, Roger Routin, Stephane Legoff, Ted Koppel, Terry Love, Timothy Keer, Timothy Pham, Tom Cooper, Tran Tan Tiep, Ung Buu Hoang Nguyen, Victor Flintham, Vo Ngoc Cac, Vu Dinh and to all the other people who wish to stay anonymous, fearing for the safety of their families.

Everybody in some way or another helped me with the research and made this book possible.

Albert Grandolini

Military historian and aviation-journalist, Albert Grandolini, was born in France and gained an MA in history from Paris I Sorbonne University. His primary research focus is on contemporary conflicts in general and particularly on the military history of Asia. Having spent his childhood in South Vietnam, the Vietnam War has been one of his main fields of research. He is the author of the books *The Fall of the Flying Dragon*, *South Vietnamese Air Force (1973-1975)* with Harpia Publishing and *Armor of the Vietnam War: the Asian Forces*, Concord Publishing. He is also co-author of the two volumes on Libyan Air Wars with Helion in the *Africa@War* Series. He has also written numerous articles for various British, French and German magazines such as *Air Enthusiast*, *Flieger Revue Extra*, *Fana de l'aviation*, *Tank Zone* and *Batailles et Blindés*. He has regularly contributed to the Air Combat Information Group (ACIG) and the *Au Delà de la Colline* military history French website.